A PINCH OF HAPPINESS

Stories of Rural Life and Quiet Endurance

EK CHUTKEE KHUSHEE

Collection of Maithili Stories by

Jagdish Prasad Mandal

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Translated into English by

Rameshwar Prasad Mandal

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Translated from the original Maithili by

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Berma/Nirmali

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English Translation of the Maithili Short Story Collection Ek Chutkee Khushee
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A Pinch of Happiness is a collection of Maithili short stories by Jagdish Prasad Mandal that offers a restrained yet finely observed portrayal of everyday human life. Set in rural Mithila, the stories avoid romanticising village existence or aestheticising poverty. Instead, they present a morally complex world shaped by labour, scarcity, custom, and constant social scrutiny. The characters–farmers, labourers, women, and elders–navigate questions of dignity and ethical choice within narrowly defined limits of freedom.

Jagdish Prasad Mandal is a leading voice in modern Maithili fiction, widely recognised for his ethical realism and quiet narrative discipline. He was awarded the 2021 Sahitya Akademi Award for his novel Pangu, in recognition of his significant contribution to Indian literature.

Marked by restraint and moral attentiveness, the collection allows meaning to surface through silences and small moments rather than overt instruction. Rooted in Mithila yet universally resonant, A Pinch of Happiness reflects human endurance and the fragile, carefully measured nature of happiness itself.

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to those who endure life with quiet dignity, finding meaning in small moments of honesty and care.
It honours lives shaped by restraint, responsibility, and the fragile persistence of hope.

- Rameshwar Prasad

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Preface

☰

A Pinch of Happiness

The stories collected in A Pinch of Happiness belong to a literary tradition shaped by ethical restraint, careful observation, and a deep respect for human dignity. Written by Jagdish Prasad Mandal, a major figure in modern Maithili fiction, these narratives arise from the everyday realities of rural Mithila while addressing concerns that transcend any single region or culture.

Mandal's fiction does not treat village life as a picturesque backdrop or a site of nostalgic longing. Nor does it romanticize hardship or idealize rural simplicity. Instead, the rural world in these stories is portrayed as a morally complex social landscape, shaped by labor, scarcity, tradition, memory and social pressure. Within this space, individuals continually negotiate survival, self-respect, and ethical choices under conditions that leave little room for certainty or comfort.

The characters inhabiting these stories are drawn from ordinary life: farmers and agricultural

laborers bound to the rhythms of land and season; women who sustain families through endurance, silence, and moral clarity; aging men reflecting on loss, responsibility, and social change; and families held together as much by obligation and custom as by affection. These figures are not symbols or allegories. Mandal resists turning them into representatives of abstract ideas or causes. They are individuals whose lives unfold quietly, often without dramatic resolution, yet remain deeply meaningful.

What gives these stories their lasting force is not plot-driven momentum but moral attentiveness. Small moments, such as a ritual observed, a conversation deferred, or a choice made under pressure, carry disproportionate weight. Meaning arises not through proclamation but through accumulation; not through judgment but through exposure. In this sense, A Pinch of Happiness aligns with a tradition of social realism that values lived experience over ideological statement.

Firmly rooted in the social soil of Mithila, these stories nevertheless speak in a language of experience that feels unmistakably universal. The conditions they depict–economic vulnerability, social surveillance, ethical compromise, and the fragile pursuit of dignity–are not confined to a single geography. Mandal's rural world becomes a lens that brings larger questions of human endurance, responsibility, and conscience into quiet but

persistent focus.

The Meaning of "A Pinch of Happiness"

The title A Pinch of Happiness does not suggest fulfilment or abundance. Instead, it points to something measured, fragile, and intentionally restrained. Happiness in these stories is never portrayed as a stable condition or a lasting possession. It appears briefly, often unexpectedly, within lives shaped by scarcity, labor, and social pressure. Its value lies precisely in its limitation.

In Mandal's fictional world, happiness is inseparable from hardship. It takes shape in modest, easily overlooked moments: a meal shared without anxiety; the completion of a customary ritual; the recovery of self-respect after public humiliation; or simply the continuation of life when circumstances threaten to overwhelm it. These moments do not resolve suffering, nor do they redeem injustice. They exist alongside constraint, not beyond it.

This understanding of happiness resists sentimental interpretation. Jagdish Prasad Mandal does not portray poverty as ennobling, nor does he turn endurance into a moral spectacle. His concern lies elsewhere. He draws attention to the quiet forms of resilience through which individuals preserve meaning and dignity within restrictive social and economic arrangements. Happiness, in this sense, is not an escape from reality but a way of remaining

human within it.

The word pinch in the title carries ethical weight. It acknowledges scarcity without falling into despair and affirms joy without excess. It suggests that even the smallest measure of happiness can sustain life when circumstances offer little else. At the same time, it refuses to exaggerate that joy into consolation. What remains is a careful balance between recognizing deprivation and respecting the human capacity to endure without illusion.

In naming the collection A Pinch of Happiness, Mandal situates his stories within a moral economy that values proportion, restraint, and honesty. Happiness here is neither denied nor idealized. It is measured, earned, and provisional, yet indispensable to the continuation of life itself.

Thematic Landscape of the Collection

The stories in A Pinch of Happiness unfold across a carefully interwoven thematic landscape, shaped by social experience, ethical tension, and everyday survival. These themes are not treated as abstract concerns but are rooted in lived situations, where moral choices emerge gradually and often without certainty.

A recurrent concern throughout the collection is the influence of social pressure and public honour. Mandal consistently explores how reputation, gossip, and communal scrutiny shape individual behaviour.

Society is portrayed less as an arbiter of justice and more as a regulating force that disciplines people through expectation, silence, and selective indifference. Public honour operates not as a shared ethical value but as a fragile form of social currency. It is unevenly distributed, inconsistently upheld, and frequently used to control or marginalise.

Equally central is the theme of labour and survival. Work in these stories is inseparable from the body and the land. It is repetitive, physically demanding, and tied to seasonal rhythms beyond human control. Mandal portrays labour as neither heroic nor degrading. Its dignity exists alongside fatigue, uncertainty, and vulnerability, revealing a world in which survival depends on sustained, often unacknowledged effort.

Women's experiences form one of the most quietly powerful strands of the collection. Rather than emphasising overt resistance, Mandal draws attention to forms of endurance, negotiation, and inward clarity. Women navigate family, tradition, and social expectation through restraint and intelligence, often expressed through silence rather than speech. These silences are not empty. They are socially imposed yet personally inhabited, making visible the emotional and moral labour that remains largely unrecognised.

A persistent tension between tradition and change runs through many narratives. Rituals,

inherited customs, and established practices are presented without nostalgia or dismissal. They provide continuity and belonging, yet also limit individual choice. Mandal's fiction resists simple binaries. Tradition is neither an obstacle to be discarded nor a sanctuary to be idealised; it is a living structure within which people seek meaning.

Beneath all these themes lies a sustained engagement with moral uncertainty. Mandal avoids definitive judgments. Ethical dilemmas are left unresolved, shaped by circumstance, hierarchy, and necessity rather than by universal principles. Right and wrong remain situational, and decisions are made under pressure rather than guided by conviction. In inviting the reader to inhabit this uncertainty, the stories refuse easy consolation and instead offer a deeper, more honest understanding of human life.

Authorial Intent: Witness, Not Instruction

A defining feature of Jagdish Prasad Mandal's storytelling is his principled refusal to instruct. These stories do not prescribe how society ought to be reformed, nor do they promote ideological solutions. Their primary commitment is to bearing witness, allowing social reality to reveal itself through lived situations, ordinary gestures, and their consequences, rather than through authorial argument.

Throughout the collection, Mandal consistently places his characters in morally charged situations and then steps back. In narratives shaped by ritual observance, public shame, domestic obligation, or economic pressure, he withholds interpretive guidance. Events unfold in their own rhythm: a hesitation before speaking, a decision made under social scrutiny, a silence that carries more weight than dialogue. Meaning arises not through explanation but through what the moment demands of the characters.

Mandal allows events to develop with deliberate restraint. Authorial intervention is minimal, and moral commentary is consistently withheld. This restraint is not an expression of neutrality but a form of ethical confidence. It reflects a belief that lived experience, when presented without distortion, carries its own authority. The narrative does not clarify, justify, or correct its characters. Instead, it reveals the conditions under which they act and leaves the ethical burden within the situation itself.

The individuals who inhabit these stories are not heroic figures striving toward abstract moral ideals. They are ordinary people operating within narrow margins of choice. A farmer calculating social expectation against personal conviction, an elderly man weighing ritual duty against practical necessity, or a woman absorbing unspoken responsibility within the household, such figures appear

throughout the collection. Their decisions are shaped as much by habit, fear, and social obligation as by courage or moral resolve. Mandal refuses to elevate them into symbols of resistance or failure. In preserving their ordinariness, he preserves their humanity.

This narrative stance gives the stories a quiet but enduring authority. The absence of overt judgment does not weaken their social force; it strengthens it. Injustice, inequality, and emotional loss are not framed as arguments to be debated but as conditions to be encountered. The reader is not guided toward a conclusion or offered a moral shortcut. Instead, the narrative brings the reader close to experience, close enough to feel its pressure, its hesitation, and its unresolved tension.

By privileging witness over instruction, Mandal's fiction resists simplification. It neither consoles nor condemns. It does not transform suffering into a moral spectacle, nor does it offer the promise of redemption. Instead, it calls for sustained attention. The reader is asked to remain with uncertainty, to recognise complexity without resolving it, and to acknowledge the ethical weight carried by lives lived under constraint.

Language, Form, and Narrative Craft

The prose of Jagdish Prasad Mandal is defined by economy, precision, and deliberate control.

Narrative events are often minimal, sometimes almost incidental, yet the situations they generate are dense with implication. Meaning does not announce itself; it gathers slowly. Silence, pause, hesitation, and understatement function as central narrative devices rather than as decorative elements.

Mandal's stories rely less on what is said than on what is withheld. Gestures, delays, unfinished thoughts, and restrained responses carry ethical and emotional weight. A character's silence in a public setting, a conversation that circles without resolution, or a routine action performed under social pressure often reveals more than extended explanation. Meaning arises through accumulation rather than declaration, through exposure rather than commentary.

Dialogue in these narratives is sparse but charged. When characters speak, their words are shaped by social hierarchy, obligation, and caution. Speech is rarely free or expansive; it is measured, conditional, and often indirect. What remains unsaid–whether out of fear, decorum, or habit–becomes as significant as what is spoken. This controlled use of dialogue reinforces the moral tension embedded within ordinary situations.

Description, too, is governed by restraint. Mandal avoids descriptive excess, selecting only those details necessary to situate the reader within a moral and emotional landscape. Physical settings are

sketched with economy, serving as extensions of social and ethical conditions rather than as autonomous visual scenes. The emphasis remains on lived experience rather than on aesthetic display.

This stylistic discipline presents particular challenges for translation. Much of the narrative effect lies not in lexical density but in rhythm, pause, and tonal balance. Translating these stories, therefore, involves more than conveying meaning across languages. It requires preserving proportion and restraint. The English rendering seeks to maintain this balance, retaining the measured pace, observational clarity, and ethical quietness of the original Maithili texts without compensating for silence through amplification.

In Mandal's work, language is never ornamental. It is functional, moral, and attentive, shaped to serve experience rather than overshadow it. Form and content remain inseparable, each reinforcing the other in a narrative practice that values clarity without simplification and depth without display.

Relevance Beyond Region

Although firmly grounded in the social and cultural landscape of Mithila, the stories in A Pinch of Happiness extend well beyond regional boundaries. The conditions they explore, such as economic

vulnerability, social surveillance, gendered silence, moral compromise, and the fragile pursuit of dignity, are not confined to any single geography. These themes appear wherever lives are shaped by inequality, obligation, and limited choice.

Readers familiar with rural societies in other parts of South Asia, Africa, or Latin America will readily recognise these patterns of endurance and negotiation. Yet the relevance of these stories is not limited to rural settings. In urban and global contexts, where pressures take different forms but exert similar force, the emotional truths within these narratives remain recognisable. The social gaze, the management of reputation, the quiet erosion of autonomy, and the search for meaning under constraint are experiences that transcend borders.

What gives this collection its enduring significance is its commitment to human complexity. Jagdish Prasad Mandal neither simplifies suffering nor transforms it into aesthetic spectacle. His writing refuses consolation and avoids moral exaggeration. Lives are allowed to appear in their incompleteness, marked by hesitation, compromise, and unresolved tension.

In doing so, Mandal offers not comfort, but clarity. The clarity that emerges is unsentimental and demanding, yet it creates space for recognition rather than despair. Within this clear-eyed engagement with limitation and endurance lies the

possibility suggested by the title itself: a small, fragile, but sustaining happiness. It is a form of happiness that does not erase hardship, yet makes life bearable within it.

After reading all the stories, I realised that the fleeting happiness a sdrowning person feels upon grasping a rope is the same happiness evoked by *A Pinch of Happiness.* Thank you all.

- Rameshwar Prasad Mandal

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Dated the 6th February 2025

Public Shame

☰

It was the first fortnight of Agahan, the seventh lunar day, and the day of Nawan. At eight in the morning, Sattan Kaka lifted his eyes toward the day's tasks, and a quiet ease began to stir in his mind. The reason was simple: today was Nawan.

At four in the early dawn, he had seen his son return after cutting and bringing home a bundle of freshly harvested paddy. Just as in Jagannath Puri, where paddy is cut one day, prepared the next, and offerings are made from the same grain, Nawan was observed in their home in a similar way.

A sense of fulfilment settled over Sattan Kaka, and the usual worry of arranging a meal slipped away. As he stepped forward and raised his eyes, he saw the vegetable seller smiling as she left the courtyard. He had already noticed the fresh betel leaves, which added to his sense of contentment.

Then came another thought: today was sacred, a day for eating and sharing joy. On such a day, if one were to step out for work, go to the fields, or

engage in any task of daily necessity, how would that appear? Along with people, there is also public shame.

Sattan Kaka became absorbed in his own thoughts.

At certain turns in life, or at moments of transition, a person’s needs are shaped by others. This was the state of Sattan Kaka’s mind. He kept lifting his gaze toward the road, hoping someone might pass by, so he could ask a question and ease the restlessness within him. But when no one appeared, his unease grew.

Then, suddenly, a calm settled over his agitated mind. With it came a thought: whatever happens in society is seen by society itself. Yet four to six annas–roughly twenty-five to thirty percent of people–live in such a way that nothing burdens them. Still, they firmly believe that public shame is the shared moral wealth of the community.

By chance, at that very moment, Mangal Bhai was on his way to the shop to buy items for the Nawan observance. Sattan Kaka’s house lay between Mangal Bhai’s home and the shop. For as long as he could remember, Mangal Bhai had regarded Sattan Kaka as a guide, not just because of his age but because of his worldly wisdom and sound judgment.

It was true that Mangal Bhai caught a fleeting glimpse of Sattan Kaka sitting at the doorstep. But,

noticing the bustle and urgency of the festival day, he turned his face away and continued down the road toward the shop. His mind was occupied with its own calculations. Today was Nawan. Everyone else had gone to the Jhanjharpur market the day before and returned with all their provisions. People like him, who hadn't done the same, now had to buy from the village shop. That meant the shop would likely be crowded, and there was no telling how long the wait might be.

If he stopped now at Sattan Kaka's place, delay was almost certain, and by the time he reached the shop, some essential items might already be sold out. After all, it was only a village shop. There was no guarantee of what would still be available and what might already be gone. And on a festival day like this, people tended to buy far more than usual. If he fell behind and arrived late, what would he even find, and how would the ritual be completed?

With his eyes fixed on the road ahead, Mangal Bhai walked straight on, quickening his pace toward the shop.

Meanwhile, a restless urge was rising within Sattan Kaka, much like the tingling in the nose of someone addicted to snuff when the craving begins. His lips itched to speak. Seeing Mangal Bhai approaching from the southern direction, from home toward the shop, Sattan Kaka thought to himself that Mangal was indeed coming. They should

sit together and talk, as befits elders of the same generation.

As long as Mangal Bhai was still some distance away, Sattan Kaka kept lifting his eyes from time to time to look. But the moment Mangal Bhai came directly in front of the house, Sattan Kaka lowered his gaze and fixed his eyes on the ground. A sudden stirring of shame had risen within him, shame directed not at Mangal, but toward society itself, toward the people of the village. After all, it was a public road. All kinds of people passed along it. To keep raising one's eyes and staring like a loafer would surely violate the bounds of public decorum.

When Mangal Bhai crossed the front boundary of his house, Sattan Kaka called out-

"Mangal, why are you walking by with your face turned away like that?"

Hearing Sattan Kaka's words, Mangal Bhai thought to himself that the two of them were of the same standing, almost like members of the same household. In such a case, if his elder spoke sharply and he remained silent, that too would be improper. Yet replying to a hurtful remark with a hurtful tone would also be wrong. At that moment, a thought from Kabir came to mind- "If someone sows thorns for you, sow flowers in return."

Telling an outright lie would not be right either. So he chose a middle path and decided to offer a

small excuse. Framing it carefully, Mangal Bhai said-

"Kaka, till yesterday I truly hadn't realised that Nawan was today. No one had reminded me either. This morning, when I woke up, my wife told me that today was the observance and asked what preparations had been made. Hearing her urgency, my mind flew off in all directions and my attention slipped away."

Mangal Bhai's excuse sounded plausible. Sattan Kaka responded-

"Mangal, you're usually so meticulous. You always remember which festival falls in which month, on which day, and what its significance is. How did you forget Nawan this time?"

Sattan Kaka kept pressing one remark after another upon Mangal Bhai, while Mangal stood there as if he had already taken his place in the queue at the oil-and-salt shop. All of a sudden, the hunger associated with the Jitiya fast stirred within Mangal Bhai. He spoke up-

"Kaka, people perform Nawan these days when their heart agrees to it. Just as, after a marriage, people accept the return procession as proper, in the same way, Nawan too has already taken place."

Sattan Kaka understood Mangal Bhai's sharp and cutting way of speaking well enough. Still, when good words are spoken with a smile and lead to the attainment of something meaningful, they are

bound to be received in the right spirit. Just as in the Mahabharata, where a verse following another often carries a hidden and layered meaning of its own, Sattan Kaka cast his own indirect glance and said-

"Speak a little more plainly, Mangal."

Both men were of the same standing–Sattan Kaka and Mangal Bhai alike–who, through long effort, had shaped not only their age and experience but also their social position, like a field prepared through repeated ploughing over the seasons.

Smiling, Mangal Bhai replied- "Kaka, right before you there is the village, and in the village, there are farmers as well."

Hearing the words- "the village and its farmers before your eyes," Sattan Kaka agreed- "Yes, that is true."

Understanding that his point had found support, and feeling assured in it, Mangal Bhai continued speaking to Sattan Kaka-

"Kaka, everyone knows that before 1971, farmers used to grow two kinds of paddy each year. Along with the main rainy-season crop, there was also bhadai. But bhadai was like a quiet person, ripening and readying itself beneath the husk, unnoticed. Still, whatever it was, it was what it was."

Interrupting with a probing tone, Sattan Kaka asked- "What did people consider gamhari to be?"

Mangal Bhai felt that the root of his argument

had been caught. He replied- “That’s exactly what I’m saying, Kaka. The bhadai variety of paddy was considered impure. In it, gamhari was seen as both pure and impure. Just like people say, ‘If you have a place, you stay put; otherwise, you keep wandering and stumbling along.’”

Testing the firmness of Mangal Bhai’s thinking, Sattan Kaka asked- “What is pure, and what is impure?”

Smiling faintly, Mangal Bhai said- “Kaka, in society there are people like that too. They earn their living from your fields, yet they still call you untouchable, impure, and low.”

Just as people can get swept away in a current– whether it is the flow of water or the flow of ideas– and begin speaking whatever comes to their lips, Sattan Kaka watched Mangal Bhai being carried along by his own words and said-

“Why are you getting so swept away, like a flood, Mangal?”

Startled, the way one instinctively raises a hand to the head at the sudden crack of thunder during the rainy season, Mangal Bhai said quickly,

“Kaka, bhadai paddy was forbidden in ritual observances!”

As if he had found a seed in a rough, stony field, Sattan Kaka seized upon the point and replied-

“Mangal, in the Jitiya observance people even

eat fish and madua flatbread.”

Like someone releasing an arrow without aiming, Mangal Bhai shot back-

“Kaka, don’t you know that madua has now been declared a sacred grain?”

Sattan Kaka said- “So fish and greens are acceptable, but only madua is singled out?”

Mangal Bhai replied-

“Kaka, one thought slipped my mind earlier. Let me say that first.”

Sattan Kaka began to search his own mind in silence. Which earlier thought had Mangal let slip? It did not come to him at once. Meanwhile, Mangal Bhai continued-

“Kaka, when the slogan ‘Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan’ rang out across the country, everything related to agricultural production was stirred into motion. New varieties of improved grains, along with seeds for fruits and flowers, reached villages and homes. As a result, from Bhadon through Poush and Magh–that is, from August to January or February–lowland fields now produce paddy continuously. In such a situation, what importance does Nawan really hold?”

Hearing Mangal Bhai’s reasoning, Sattan Kaka fell silent. Yet the ritual pull of the festival, the inner tug of Nawan, that lived in his own heart, lived in Mangal Bhai’s heart as well. Gathering both strands together, Sattan Kaka asked- “Mangal, what

preparations are you making for Nawan?"

Mangal Bhai replied- "Kaka, I'm arranging things for the sake of public shame."

At the words "public shame," Sattan Kaka's mind stirred sharply. With that stirring came another thought. Whom did Mangal mean by public shame, and what exactly did he mean by it? That would become clear only when Mangal spoke it aloud himself. Sattan Kaka asked-

"What do you mean by public shame, Mangal?"

Sattan Kaka understood public shame as something rooted in a person's sense of being human. According to the moral thread by which he lived, he believed that when respect for the world awakens within people, sensitivity awakens in the heart as well, and it is there that public shame takes its place. Yet, keeping his own thoughts gathered within, Sattan Kaka grew curious to hear Mangal Bhai's meaning directly. Like a keen listener, he steadied his eyes and ears and prepared to listen.

Both men were of the same standing, Sattan Kaka and Mangal Bhai, and so they looked straight into each other's eyes. In the midst of that silence, Mangal Bhai spoke- "Kaka, what can I say? In the old woman's bundle, public shame has gone missing. It won't return on its own, and that's why..."

Hearing this, Sattan Kaka said-

"Mangal, to see the world one must look at the

world. But as for oneself, one can always look within.”

Caught in the force of Sattan Kaka’s thought, Mangal Bhai stumbled, much like a boat losing its way in a whirlpool. He said-

"Kaka, what can I say? We see it in every household: those who do nothing hold authority over those who work. In a place like this, how could you and I not feel restless?"

Listening to Mangal Bhai, Sattan Kaka grew calm, like the gentle chill of Phagun that, after the dew of Kartik and Agahan turns into frost in Magh, cools the season once again.

Mangal Bhai’s voice softened as he continued-

“Kaka, there’s a bundle of demand for the festival from my wife. No matter how much I want to steer my mind elsewhere, along the road of life, I can’t do it. If I don’t fulfil it, people will surely talk.”

Just as an understanding is forged between a vulture and a serpent through knowledge, something similar was taking shape between Sattan Kaka’s thoughts and Mangal Bhai’s. Yet there was no bitterness in it, only a tender ache. Neither Sattan Kaka harboured a harmful notion, nor did Mangal Bhai. There was no real opposition in their thinking. Their difference ran deep enough to keep them together, and yet it also created distance.

With the intention of steering Mangal Bhai’s

thoughts toward clarity, Sattan Kaka said-

“Mangal, a life caught up in petty quarrels and household squabbles will wear itself away.”

Mangal Bhai suddenly felt as if a hidden meaning had been uncovered for him, the way a layered insight reveals itself once its sense is grasped. He said- “Kaka, please say it a little more plainly.”

Sattan Kaka replied- “Today is a festival day. A day for eating, drinking, and sharing joy. So I won’t stop you now, and I won’t stop myself either. Your wife may be agree to you in impatience, but keeping your mouth completely shut would not be right.”

Agreeing, Mangal Bhai said- “That too makes sense.”

Sattan Kaka concluded- "Not much for now. Just this much at present, that there are fourteen people among us, and within that gathering, shame still exists." ❑

Threshing the Paddy

☰

As on any other day, Vishwanath Baba was walking around, inspecting his litchi orchard, when his ten-year-old grandson, Sudhir, came into the yard from the courtyard, holding a mobile phone.

A man of few words and firm habits, Vishwanath Baba was known for speaking only when necessary.

Being such a person, he often stood at odds with the spirit of the times, especially when it came to mobile phones. Everyone can see it now. Just as during worship one hand is kept occupied holding the water for offering, in today's world the mobile phone fills one hand for the entire day. What truly fills it, and why, is understood only by those who give and receive such burdens, and by those who are devoted to their phones.

Vishwanath Baba, however, being resolute and self-restrained, had firmly bound one thought within his mind: life must be contained within the limits it is

given. Only then can life remain aligned with itself and move forward in balance. Otherwise, it becomes like a heron trying to pry open a bamboo knot with its beak.

Sudhir spoke quickly- “Baba, there’s a phone call.”

Vishwanath Baba’s mind grew heavy. The reason for his heaviness lay elsewhere. He had planted seven litchi trees, yet all seven did not bear fruit of seven different kinds. Nor was it the case that each tree was of such a variety that one or another would bear fruit throughout the year, month after month.

He understood many things well enough, but this troubled him deeply. Still, he tried to understand his own thoughts, and did so with care. In that understanding, he had come to believe firmly that the litchi of Mithila was many times better than the Kashmiri apple. That was why, for the nourishment of his household throughout the year, Vishwanath Baba had planted fruit trees in his own garden with his own hands.

Seeing the present condition of the litchi crop, he felt a deep ache rise within him. The fruit of an entire year was being lost. Disease had struck all the trees. That was why his mind had grown heavy.

Alongside this, anger over the state of his own life was also beginning to rise within him. But at

once, he restrained himself, the way one direction checks another. Just as sin checks virtue, and virtue, in turn, checks sin. Knowledge restrains ignorance, and ignorance restrains knowledge as well. Such a play goes on unceasingly, every hour of the day.

After all, in twenty-four hours there are twelve hours of day and twelve hours of night, as people say. Yet if one thinks carefully, the balance of day and night across the year is never exactly equal. There are imbalances, shifts, small excesses and shortages. In the division of months and days, there may be disorder, but not on the twenty-second of March or the twenty-second of September.

Even if, in the month of Jeth, the nights grow shorter and the days longer, one cannot say that in Poush and Magh the nights truly lengthen and the days shorten in perfect measure.

Whatever the case, none of this mattered to Vishwanath Baba. What mattered was only this: that he did not become careless toward himself, nor toward others, and did not lose hold of his own grounding.

Steadying his mind, Vishwanath Baba said-

“Bring it here. Bring it. Whose phone is it?”

Sudhir, who barely understood such things, replied-

“As soon as it rang, I picked it up and brought it straight to you.”

Vishwanath Baba had complete faith in his grandson's words. And why wouldn't he? One could say that children today have become clever with words and that lies slip out more easily. That would be your view, and I would not interfere with it. After all, we see things ourselves, and by questioning again and again, we also build our own trust.

Children chew shikhar or parag tobacco, and even when their mouths give loud, obvious testimony to it, they still refuse to admit that they have eaten shikhar or parag gutka.

But that was not the case here. Vishwanath Baba's trust in his grandson ran deep. Sudhir, unlike other children, did not lie. After all, truth and falsehood are not illnesses that strike in a single day. They grow gradually, like weeds spreading bit by bit, creeping and curling until they cover the whole body.

Vishwanath Baba did not see that pattern in Sudhir at all. From childhood, he had kept a close watch on him. Sudhir was a child of a farming family. Just as a teacher plants the knowledge of letters and numbers in a student's mind, parents in a farming household plant the values of agricultural life in their children's minds.

Of course, not everyone does this. In the lure of government jobs, families also pass on habits ranging from petty clerical work to salaried employment. But here, we are speaking only of the

life story of a farming family.

Without saying anything further, Vishwanath Baba took the mobile phone from Sudhir's hand, pressed the receive button, and held it to his ear. A voice came through- "Is this Vishwanath, sir?"

Vishwanath Baba replied-

"Yes. Who is speaking?"

The voice answered- "This is the principal of Lakshmipati School."

Hearing the word "principal," Vishwanath Baba was momentarily taken aback. But when he lifted his eyes and glanced around the four corners of the yard, he soon made his peace with it. Just as there had once been a flood of singers and dancers, players and performers, so too there now seemed to be a flood of principals.

Vishwanath Baba was reminded of his own time. He remembered when only a few, carefully counted colleges had principals, while the rest had in-charges or heads of departments. Now, from nursery schools all the way up to colleges, there was a principal everywhere.

He reasoned this out within himself, and his mind settled. Yes, it must indeed be the principal of Lakshmipati School calling.

Vishwanath Baba said- "What instructions do you have for me?"

The principal replied- "Tomorrow there is the

final match of the cricket tournament at our school. The committee has decided that the prizes should be distributed by your hands. That is our request."

Just as in the month of Sawan the blazing sun pours down, and then, on the edge of the eastern sky, a small cloud rises and slowly spreads, covering the entire sky and stirring thunder and lightning along with wind and rain, so too an inner turbulence began to rise in Vishwanath Baba's mind.

He could see clearly how there had once been a time when people spent entire days lost in card games. Even now, such places still existed. This is not to say that playing cards is merely an innocent pastime, for the deck of cards is also a gambling device. In today's climate, however, the number of those who oppose such games or rail against them has grown larger than the number of those who actually play. As a result, the practice itself seems close to extinction.

This does not mean that the grand importance once attached to pilgrimage sites has vanished entirely. Rather, many of them are now being reduced to routine stops for seasonal festivals and casual observances.

Just as, at the sound of thunder, an unsuspecting person instinctively raises a hand to the head and cries out, "Sahor, sahor," the same kind of reflex stirred in Vishwanath Baba's mind. All at once, he remembered his maternal uncle. The

moment the memory surfaced, the words slipped from his mouth-

"Ah, that Mike Lal!"

The phrase had escaped him involuntarily, but curiosity naturally followed. Who was this "Mike Lal"?

Vishwanath Baba's maternal uncle lived in a village nestled between the belly of the Kosi to the east and the Kamla to the west. It was a village of about five hundred households, spread across twelve hundred bighas of land. There was no sign of a school or a college there. For nearly half the year, the village remained cut off from neighbouring areas.

In that village–Himmatpur–lived Vishwanath Baba's maternal uncle. He had three such uncles, and between the three of them, they did not even own ten bighas of land. Education had never taken deep root in the village. Most people survived by farming and raising buffaloes.

His maternal uncle had shaped his life around agriculture and animal husbandry, sustaining his family and lineage with dignity. This was not a place where people, despite owning hundreds of bighas, reduced themselves to beggary and mocked their ancestral wealth.

Whatever the case elsewhere, none of that mattered to Vishwanath Baba. What mattered to him was his uncle's courage and resilience. He

remembered how, year after year, his uncle had harvested paddy from everyone's fields and even replanted the same field seven times over, yet had never once lost heart.

In other villages, fields yielded two or three crops a year, sometimes continuously. But in Himmatpur, farmers' fields remained submerged for six to eight months at a stretch, turning the land rigid with shame, like Ahalya of Mithila turned to stone. That, indeed, was Himmatpur.

Vishwanath Baba spoke into the phone-

"Why the hesitation in your voice? Go on, speak. Whatever the request is, I will try to carry it out."

Whether Vishwanath Baba's line of thought truly reached Ranglal Babu, the principal, or not, only he would know. But within Vishwanath Baba, a firm conviction had taken shape: whatever he did, he did for the welfare of children. A belief held honestly within oneself also shapes how others come to trust you.

Ranglal Babu said-

"Tomorrow, on the occasion of the closing ceremony of our school's sports meet, we request you to grace the gathering. The committee feels it would be fitting if the prizes were distributed by Vishwanath Baba's hands."

Hearing Ranglal Babu's proposal, the fire of Vishwanath Baba's own thoughts flared up. It flared

with the belief that only when a land is enriched by the wealth of children does its future learn to value true wealth and offer itself at the altar of knowledge.

But in a setting where the pursuit of sporting glory was taking on an increasingly distorted form, it seemed timely, even necessary, to exercise restraint. The frenzy of sport had indeed spread throughout the world, but amid that frenzy, it was essential to awaken one's own sense of judgment.

All at once, Vishwanath Baba's mind arrived at a firm resolution. The life he had lived until now had followed a certain direction. In such a life, would it be right to be swept away in the floods of the Kamla and the Kosi?

His resolve stood clear and steady. Replying to Ranglal Babu, he said- "I do not consider myself worthy of participating in the distribution of prizes. Therefore, I will not be present."

In his own understanding, Vishwanath Baba spoke this way because the environment taking shape today felt like one of confrontation. In a world where children, blessed with abundance, were being driven mad in pursuit of sporting wealth, it seemed only right that a person should protect himself as well. After all, human beings are not sheep to blindly follow one another into a headlong rush.

Ranglal Babu said-

"We had such high hopes, but...!"

Unmoved, Vishwanath Baba replied-

"Hope and such things mean nothing. A hotel-lover's hope lasts only as long as he stays in the hotel. Once outside, the same lover pushes you aside. So hopes built on straw have no value. Better to be declared old before old age arrives than to end up cutting grass like a stray fallen into a roadside drain."

Ranglal Babu said-

"So you are giving up all hope, then?"

Laughing, Vishwanath Baba replied-

"Give it up entirely. Everyone weaves the garland of life with their own actions. You know I am a farmer. The time for threshing the paddy has come. I consider that my true wealth: the kind that brings grain and sustenance."

Just then, ten-year-old Sudhir pleaded with his grandfather, "Baba, let's gather people and start the threshing. Come on, let me go with you too."

Hearing his grandson, Vishwanath Baba said-

"Son, a person is truly blessed only when he understands wealth as wealth." ❑

A Pinch of Happiness

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So far, even after crossing the age of fifty, Mahadev Bhai had not been able to understand how a pinch of happiness arrives in life.

Brother, this is the world. A world filled with images: ordinary, strange, and beautifully arranged. There is a Lakshmi who is called Sulakshmi, and there is also one who is called Kulakshmi. How can one deny that both exist?

What belongs to others may be difficult to grasp, but about oneself, this much is clear: turmeric is known to counter poison, yet even at the root of a turmeric plant, along with healthy shoots, poisonous growth can appear. That, too, cannot be ruled out.

Take the example of a single man or a single woman. In the course of a single day, how many forms do they assume? In such a case, how can anyone claim to be entirely one-sided?

It is known that within the human body there are billions and trillions of neurons, each powerful in

itself. Even Tulsidas did not retreat from this truth. He said- "Who would call the small insignificant, O offender?

Listen carefully and understand the difference, O seeker."

And Tulsidas did not turn his back on reality when he wrote-

"There is farming but no farmer,the beggar finds no alms, the labourer has no work,the servant no service.

Those without livelihood say to one another,

Brother, where shall we go, what shall we do?"

After all, these are Tulsidas's words. When even those who possess nothing more than a strip of cloth on their bodies are distressed, it becomes necessary to look for the root cause. It must also be recognized that when the subtlest and most refined forms of energy are stored within the human body, they inevitably carry the power to destroy as well.

Everyone knows and accepts that some people break mountains with hammer and chisel, while others struggle along carrying fragments of broken stones. This is the game of life, where one says, "A deserted furnace feeds no one," and then eats heartily oneself. Whatever the case, this reality belongs to everyone.

Listen to yourself. Year after year, in the month of Kartik, a fifteen-day Bhagwat Katha is held at the

Hanuman temple. You are a well-known, seasoned devotee of the pandit. He knows you, and you know him too. Because of this connection, it naturally happens that as long as you keep choosing tobacco leaves for the pandit, you remain both a donor and his devotee.

Is it that the pandit no longer feels the craving for tobacco like others? Of course he does. That is why he continues to ask, like a beggar seeking alms.

But let us leave aside the discussion about the pandit. It is a Bhagwat Katha. After all, Hari is infinite, and the stories of Hari are infinite. Even today, if we begin listening to the life stories of each individual human being, would that not amount to seven billion stories?

Now think for yourself. Would there be even a single day left when a new life story does not emerge? Of course not. New stories will always emerge. This is the world. Fruits and flowers of many colours keep blooming, and people's ways of living and moving continue to change.

It is an understood fact that where fields and farmlands should have been recognised as the foundation of life, and where reflection on their life-giving power was necessary, people ended up seeing nothing beyond ritual devotion and chanting the name of Ram.

Until the period before the freedom movement, that is, before 1947, so long as kings, estates, and

elder and younger zamindar brothers controlled the fields and farmlands, agrarian life here remained on the brink of collapse. On the one hand, natural calamities–floods and droughts–struck year after year. On top of that, under foreign rule, there were no facilities or support systems.

In such a situation, you can imagine for yourself what the condition of village society must have been. That condition still survives even today. Whatever the case may be, it does not concern us here.

It is a Bhagwat Katha, yet one thought continues to trouble the mind. That thought is this: if one cannot do good to another by one's own effort, one should at least not cause harm.

From this much, it becomes clear that everyone in society says the same thing, and they also understand and accept it. But the traps of caste and the traps of religion have tightened so much that they do not allow any real harmony between people.

We see it every day. There are three children in the same family, and all three are sent to three different schools. While they remain in school, things somehow hold together, but the moment they return home, friction begins. This pattern is spreading from family to family.

It is true that many people still call themselves my friends, but I have removed everyone from my heart. What does society gain by endless domestic

quarrelling and petty conflict?

Just as during Durga Puja the ten doors of every village open wide, in the same way, paths for oneself are open within society. I openly tell everyone, “Brother, I will not take what you earn, nor will you take what I earn. We are human beings. Only if we relate to one another as human beings will harmony survive in society.”

But things do not change merely because I think this way. Everyone has their own mind, their own way of thinking. And so it comes down to this: if you yourself are well, then the world is well.

I say that I maintain harmony with everyone in the village. The villagers themselves understand, think, and reflect on why they should get caught in the grip of caste and religion and turn village homes into spaces of abuse, violence, and hostility. Just as everyone is the master of their own mind, so am I.

You tell me: why should people of any caste or community, if they cannot find marriage alliances within their own group, be condemned for forming a new family within the wider society? Is that somehow wrong?

At that point, you may say to yourself- “Everyone eats the same food and drinks the same water; food has no caste.” You may keep telling yourself that. But let me ask you this: if I live in society, am I not also a part of society?

Then when a dead body is left without dignity

and torn apart by crows and dogs, is it not better to cremate it, bury it, or consign it to the waters of the Ganga or the Kosi? Is giving that body dignity in society's interest, or against it?

Because of such actions, some people call me a "misguided monkey," while others label me a "traitor to society." Everyone understands things in their own way. But if I do not act according to the voice of my own conscience, how can I trust someone else who claims to be the master of my mind?

Whatever happens, remember this: just as a path stretches before you–from the past through the present to the future–the same path stretches before me.

During the floods, which have now lasted seven days, the village has been surrounded and held captive by rising water. All work related to farming and the fields has gone under. Even the grass stored for the cattle has been submerged.

However, fortune favoured us in one way. We managed to save some wheat bran and two sacks of cattle feed. That has eased our worry about the two cows, at least for now.

You could say that without green fodder, both the quality and quantity of milk will decline. But tell me this: In such a situation, should we be thinking about quality and quantity, or about saving the animal's life?

Drinking tea at dawn, ever since the floods

arrived, we have given up the morning breakfast. There are many reasons for that, though this is not the time to explain them. For now, this much: we drank tea, chewed tobacco, and, with a sturdy walking four hand stick in hand, set off for Mahadev Bhai's place.

One might ask, when two and a half to three feet of water is flowing along the road, why carry a walking four hand stick? But one must also understand this: by nature, everyone's arms, whether man or woman, measure about three and a half cubits. Some may well have arms five cubits long, and if someone's arms are only two and a half cubits, who could stop them? Still, the body has its own measure.

We see people of three and a half cubits in height covering themselves with six-cubit sheets and five-cubit quilts. Anyway, carrying the walking stick, we reached Mahadev Bhai's house.

Mahadev Bhai stood in the doorway. For the cold months ahead, he was preparing Junna for Biraba and arranging dried cow-dung cakes to sit by the fire. Yet his heart was not fully in the task; his mind was firmly gripped by worry.

I spoke lightly- "Brother, only after enduring the floods can one sit by the winter fire, isn't that so?"

Thinking to myself, I tried to draw Mahadev Bhai toward my way of thinking. But the worry

already gripping his mind was so strong that it brushed aside whatever I had hoped to convey.

Meanwhile, I came closer. As soon as I reached him, I touched his feet and said- “Brother, I’m here too.”

The expression on Mahadev Bhai’s face looked as desolate as if some priceless thing in his life had been lost. Sitting beside him, I kept watching his face, waiting to hear what he would say next. It did not seem that his gaze had dulled; rather, there was a deep seriousness in his eyes.

Mahadev Bhai said- “Motilal, what can I say? Since morning, my mind has felt heavy.”

Just as an honest person shares a thought with complete sincerity, Mahadev Bhai went on,

"Moti, even now, most people believe that life lasts a hundred years; that is, a full century."

As people often respond to serious thoughts not with seriousness but with a bit of cleverness, I replied- “Brother, such thoughts belonged to sages and ascetics. Now we are seeing a time when more young people are dying than the old.”

Acknowledging what I said- Mahadev Bhai replied- “Moti, I am not dismissing your point.”

Sensing Mahadev Bhai sink into a kind of emotional monotone, I said gently-

“Brother, your mind seems deeply weighed down.”

Just as an arrow tipped with nectar pierces the heart and brings with it a taste of sweetness, something stirred inside Mahadev Bhai. He said-

"Moti, this morning, when I woke up, a thought dropped into my mind all at once, like a ripe mango falling on its own, without being plucked."

To be honest, I could not fully grasp the depth of Mahadev Bhai’s thought. Still, like someone giving a third, uncertain response, or nodding along without understanding, I said-

“What kind of thought is it, brother?”

In the course of our conversation, I had not been observing Mahadev Bhai very closely. Yet within him, a peacock-like dance of feeling had begun to unfold. Filled with a strange delight, he suddenly recited-

“Moti! Keshav! What can one say, how can one say it?

Your creation is wondrous, O Hari.

One understands it only inwardly, within the mind itself.”

After speaking these lines, Mahadev Bhai fell silent.

I remembered that I had once gone to Janakpur and bought a copy of the Vinay Patrika written by Tulsidas, the Tulsidas who came after composing the Ramayan, not before it. In that Vinay Patrika, I had

read- “Keshav, it cannot be said; what is there to say?"

Seeing Your creation, wondrous beyond measure,

one can only understand it within the heart.”

Those lines had stayed with me, and I still remembered them clearly. But what puzzled me was that since morning, Mahadev Bhai’s mind had neither taken flight nor returned to the ground. It was unclear what exactly was happening within him.

He had become like a green parrot, one that stays close to its companion all day long, and when darkness falls and they lose sight of each other, they begin to chatter upon meeting again, as if the entire world exists only in that moment of recognition. Beyond that, no further thought seemed to awaken that I could grasp.

Just as the word “mara-mara” from the mouth of the bandit Ratnakar became the path of his transformation into Valmiki, and just as in Nandanvan, Vidyapati encountered Mahesh in the form of Ugna, in the same way, Mahadev Bhai, this very morning, at the moment he rose from his bed, received a vision of his own life.

A vision of life did come to him, but it arrived only after half his life had passed, when life stood close to death. What came to him was this: as the vision is, so is the world. Creation is indeed a making,

and the world certainly exists. And within this creation, that is, within this world as creation, there is a place for us as well.

Seeing himself within his own dwelling, just as Rama encountered Valmiki and Valmiki encountered Rama, Mahadev Bhai too came face to face with the vision of his own life. As his gaze fell upon this life-vision, a softness entered his thoughts. With that softness, he said-

"Moti, when the name of a thing is a single word, it becomes easier to recognise and examine it. But when the word itself wriggles like an earthworm, sometimes spreading across a 'ZONK', sometimes slipping into the soil, then examining it is hardly easy."

If I had truly grasped the inner force and direction of Mahadev Bhai's thought, I might have responded differently. But I did not fully understand it, so I nodded and said-

"Yes, then examining it is not easy at all."

Whether Mahadev Bhai sensed the depth of my understanding or not, only he knew. But he went on-

"Moti, since this morning, from the moment I understood the word 'leader' to mean one who shows the way with vision, my mind has felt strangely airborne and unsettled."

Agreeing, I asked-

"What do you mean by that, brother?"

Mahadev Bhai said-

“Moti, what do people call the soul?”

His thought seemed somewhat erratic to me. I had never studied formal grammar, only absorbed what society had spoken into my ears over the years, much like the Vedic sages who were sages of listening. Mahadev Bhai spoke in that same spirit.

He said-

“The soul exists in an immaterial form. It takes in the vastness of existence. The soul does not merely absorb the unmanifest state of conscious awareness; through it, the body, the mind, and all the inner and outer elements of consciousness are also gathered. That is why the word atma is also connected to breath. In short, understand it this way: whatever element is related to the soul is the soul itself.”

To be honest, I did not properly understand Mahadev Bhai’s thoughts. So I say only what I understood. I asked him-

“Brother, what became of Ramvan?”

Hearing my question, just as the morning eye receives the sight of creation, Mahadev Bhai replied-

“Moti, let go of the calculations of worldly life. Create your own world and become a person of the world. Why do you wander aimlessly? The earth on which you were born is yours as well, isn’t it? Then why not fashion your own world, like Vishwamitra?”

Listening to Mahadev Bhai's words, it seemed to me that he had grown tired of conversation. So, to lighten the mood, I said-

"Brother, have you forgotten how a man of three and a half cubits made an elephant appear a dwarf, or do you still remember it?"

Laughing, Mahadev Bhai said-

"When the age of Kali began to arrive, Gods and Goddesses, elephants and deer, even the ban-gadaha creatures, all began fleeing from human calculations, abandoning one place after another. You know there is a place near the sea, in the hilly region of Tripura, called Uni-Kutti. When a crore of Gods and Goddesses fled to hide in the ocean, they kept running from place to place, and by the time they reached Tripura, dawn had broken. Once daylight came, out of public shame, they stopped running and settled right there, in Uni-Kutti."

I said- "Brother, leave aside the world's affairs. Let us think about, and actually do, what will save us from the floods."

What Mahadev Bhai took from my words, only he knew. Yet from the expression on his face, it was clear that inwardly he felt content.

I said-

"Brother, keep your happiness to yourself, but when there is a good name to be earned, offerings must be shared, mustn't they?"

Like a person weighed down by emotion, drawing long, deep breaths before speaking, Mahadev Bhai said-

"After casting a gaze upon my own life, this much faith has awakened within me: that a tree of even a pinch of happiness has been planted in my mind."❑

At Another’s Expense

☰

In Mithila, there is also a village named Suryapura. Until now, whether it be the name of a village or a person, there has always been some emotional or conceptual significance behind it, though exceptions do exist. Regardless, the name of a village or person tends to hold an abstract quality. That is to say, even upon hearing a village’s name, one does not encounter the “name” as a tangible thing. When someone says “mango,” the image of the fruit appears clearly in the mind. But a village name does not evoke anything quite so concrete.

It is this village, Surajpura, that we are speaking of: the one where Gopal Kaka lives and where I reside as well.

Gopal Kaka has now reached the final stage of life. He has crossed the age of eighty and is approaching ninety, somewhere between his ninth decade and what might be considered the threshold of ninety. Even so, compared to other faces in society, Gopal Kaka’s frame remains sturdy and well-

knit. Because of this, his mind has not yet softened into that sentimental state where, after celebrating a centenary, that is, a feast marking a hundred years, one begins to wonder whether continuing to live serves a purpose or whether departing might ease the world's burden just a little.

In the race of ideas, that is, among the thinkers who have appeared in society so far, it has never been the case that ideas ripen like fruit on a tree overnight. Even today, we can clearly see that a certain section of society works beyond normal limits. By this, I mean they labour one and a quarter, one and a half, or even twice as much as what is naturally expected of human effort.

At the same time, there are also people who do not contribute even a fraction of the reasonable labour required. The progress of any society or nation depends on the efforts of its people. Of course, change also takes place in the sequence of ideas and in the order of nature.

We see this clearly: when we plant ten kathas or one bigha of saplings and grafts, the amount of labour it takes is immense. And just when hope of fruit begins to emerge, floods or droughts strike, and those once-green saplings wither away. Orchards and livestock are not iron machines that can be commanded overnight to ascend to a higher stage of life.

It is absolutely true that the history of human

development has, until now, progressed at a slow pace. By "slow pace," one should not reduce the idea to simplistic arguments, such as Ram being only Dasharatha's son, or Valmiki belonging to a so-called lower caste. Every significant change in society has taken thousands of years.

Think of it like this: take a pulse. From the moment it first forms as a pod, we begin eating it as a vegetable. But for that same pulse to become dal or to be transformed into bread, hundreds of years pass. Even the process of making adouri or bari from pulses has taken a considerable amount of time.

However, in today's environment, machines have become so powerful that even the heaviest tasks can be completed in the shortest possible time. And yet, despite these technological advances, agriculture in Mithila–if not the nation as a whole–has deteriorated to the point where the life of the farmer is being erased. Society is being misled by all kinds of colourful arguments.

There is another matter worth considering: the structural framework of society. Human beings, since time immemorial, have lived as part of society and have continued to express their humanity within it. Therefore, the structure of society is not a recent development; it has existed since the earliest times.

Of course, our country does not fall into the category of developed nations. It belongs instead to the group of developing or lagging nations. At the

level of thought, such deep inequalities have taken shape here that falsehood and truth now stand in direct opposition.

Consider it this way: more than half of society is afflicted by the illness of fate and blind belief in destiny. Whether even a small fraction of social time is being used productively is itself doubtful. This, then, is the condition of our society and its economic structure.

From childhood, the direction of Gopal Kaka’s life has been different from that of others. Society itself is a forest; understand this clearly. Just as a forest is made up of a mix of dry and green trees, society too is a forest of human beings and their intellect. And just as a forest contains flowers and fruits of every kind, the human forest also contains ideas of every variety. Among these ideas, like the trees in a forest, there are those that bear the finest flowers and fruits, and others that are completely barren or even harmful.

Be that as it may, for now, our focus remains on Gopal Kaka.

Since childhood, Gopal Kaka has been a deeply observant person. Through careful attention to the speech and behavior of those around him, he shaped the course of his own life. From ancient times, accounts of both virtuous and immoral individuals have been passed down through folklore, scriptures, and epics. When we read the

Mahabharata, our understanding should not be confined to the story of the Kauravas and the Pandavas alone. The social life of that era is also embedded within it. What kind of people were they? In what social environment were they born? How did they establish their identity through their labour?

Today, that very social environment is collapsing at such a rapid pace that a majority of people are slipping below the threshold of a humane life. Regardless of which community the oppressed belong to, they remain an inseparable part of society. Therefore, the responsibility for their well-being lies with society itself, not merely with the machinery of governance.

From a young age, Gopal Kaka trained his life through such close observation that he developed the ability to walk with trust, even with his eyes closed. Nature does not operate under a rule in which only goodness flourishes in society while evil is excluded. There is always a mixture of both. Yet, from within this forest of society, Gopal Kaka carved out his life path through observation, much like Krishna.

Just as scriptures and epics contain the life stories of the noblest individuals, they also do not lack accounts of the worst. Gopal Kaka, by observing life closely, chose his own path with clarity and sustained a family that remained in harmony with its environment. By planting a firm resolve within his

own mind, he assumed responsibility for his actions through independent thought.

This current has always flowed through society, not just today, but throughout time: on one side, the wealthy continue to grow wealthier, and on the other, it is equally true that the poor–the Nar-Narayans–are becoming even poorer. Be that as it may, this widening gap held no particular concern for Gopal Kaka. Just as life can be made whole by gathering its fragments together, it is also true that there exist lives broken irreparably into pieces.

As the day fades, at the very arrival of evening, it has become a daily habit to step away from household duties and serve those among whom we live as members of society. For this purpose, from sunset until the third watch of the evening, Gopal Kaka would leave his own doorstep to elevate the dignity of society's collective threshold.

Life, after all, is not a joke that can run merely on a pinch of soil or the blessings of flowers and leaves. Yet, by reflecting on the course of his own life, Gopal Kaka came to a realization: society has become two-faced. With one mouth it condemns a person, and with the other, it praises the same individual. This is the dual nature of society. Everyone knows that just as floods of goodness come, floods of evil inevitably arrive as well.

By coincidence, as I was heading back toward my village, the very first doorstep I came across was

Gopal Kaka's. As luck would have it, he was standing right there, and our eyes met.

Gopal Kaka spoke first-

"Rampreet, meeting you today has happened at an auspicious moment."

To be honest, I have never truly understood what an auspicious moment is. Hearing those words from Gopal Kaka, I replied-

"Kaka, we got so lost in conversation that only now have we realised how far we've walked."

Even now, the waves of youth continue to ripple within Gopal Kaka, not the fleeting youth of the young, but something far deeper.

Gopal Kaka once said-

"Son Rampreet, everyone attains youth, but very few attain juaani. One who attains juaani understands the mystery of life. Even today, there are sages on this earth–in their eighties, nineties, even at ninety-five–who remain devoted, day and night, to the upliftment of the world.

But society is society, after all. Whether you say 'Ram' or 'mara', whether you chant 'Ram-naam satya' during a funeral, casually utter 'Ram-Ram' while brushing someone aside, or even loot in the name of 'Ram-naam', everyone has their own Ram. So keep your own share, or squander it. That is your choice."

At what point I drifted into the current of Gopal

Kaka’s thoughts, I cannot say. When I finally emerged from that whirlpool, startled into clarity, I said-

“Kaka, we may try to see life the way you do, but we can never live a life like yours.”

I believed I had said something wise, but Gopal Kaka dismissed it with ease.

“Rampreet, life is not lost anywhere for anyone. But it is found only when one truly decides to search for it.”

His words settled deeply in my mind, and I replied-

“Yes, Kabir Baba said it well: ‘Only when you search do you find pearls and diamonds.’”

As Gopal Kaka drifted between the waves of his own thoughts and the current of mine, he softly hummed to himself,

"How strange it is. The creation of the world is strange indeed."

At that moment, I could not say whether things hold more weight, or emotions do. After a short silence, Gopal Kaka’s mind grew restless. As soon as that restlessness surfaced, he said-

"Rampreet, shall we have a cup of tea?"

I was already sitting at Gopal Kaka’s place, yet he asked- “Shall we have tea?” What did that mean? It became clear that he was shaping my desire through

his own.

Gopal Kaka drinks tea ten times a day. Not out of compulsion, nor because, as social custom demands today, one must offer tea and snacks whenever a guest arrives. One could say that many people no longer chew paan, yet they are the same ones who beat the loudest drum for paan and makhana.

An entire way of life is rooted in paan and makhana, a life that stands not only on solid ground but even in water. In conversation, people observe the Chhathi fast ten times over, during Chhath, standing chest-deep in water the whole time. Life is life. It is a play, not a toy.

When one lives beside mountains on hardened, stony soil, one must endure intense heat in summer and bitter cold in winter. This is not a lesson in geography, yet the world is so uneven that in some places it rains all year long, day after day, while in others it does not rain even once throughout the year.

Similarly, we see that the lowlands near the Kosi remain waterlogged, while in the lowlands of Rajasthan, even water itself has vanished. This is what Kabir Baba meant by “the space between two millstones.” And yet, there are other kinds of millstones too, those that grind down fertile lands, full of crops and orchards, which have been

repeatedly ravaged and uprooted by the floods of the Kosi and Kamla.

Even today, such conditions persist in our society. Fields are destroyed. Homes are swept away. Yet no one steps forward to ask why, or to seek answers.

After tea and paan, I said-

“Kaka, you’ve been watching this world for more than eighty years now.”

Just as a splash of water sizzles and evaporates the moment it touches a red-hot clay tile or glowing iron, Gopal Kaka felt within himself a truth: the current of family life always flows in two directions. When it moves forward on one side, it recedes on the other.

Until now, the lifestyle in our society has broadly taken three forms. There is no need to go into all that here; only this much is worth noting for the moment: there are people who live for themselves, and there are people who live for others. And wherever people exist, their collective form–family–will continue to exist as well.

Gopal Kaka said-

“Rampreet, when I sit down to add up the past, it feels as though eighty years have slipped by unnoticed, like the pale, empty days of the month of Pus.”

Teasing him, I said- “Kaka, you didn’t keep a

diary or even a panchang, so now you're fretting like this."

Gopal Kaka replied-

"Rampreet, to speak truthfully, I never kept a proper account of the years of my life in my mind."

I asked-

"Kaka, your life has been disciplined, so why does it feel like this now?"

Gopal Kaka answered-

"It wasn't a mistake made knowingly. The mistake happened when I took on responsibilities within the flow of life, and then the world slipped away from me, and I myself became unanchored. Even now, I constantly feel I should step forward, to move ahead."

Pointing toward my own situation, I said-

"Kaka, my intention to follow your example is complete in every way, but the ways and habits of society keep holding me back."

Before I could even finish my sentence, Gopal Kaka interrupted,

"Rampreet, perhaps you don't yet fully understand your own self."

Hearing Kaka's words, I felt as though an old, unworthy instinct within me was falling away, and something new–a quiet clarity–was beginning to form. Along with a sense of joy, a feeling of remorse

also arose: that so much of life had been lost, like water slipping through one's hands.

What could I do? Like a defeated acrobat, I said-

"Kaka, is the value of all of us really no more than false worth?"

Laughing softly, Gopal Kaka said-

"Rampreet, this is life: live it smiling. Not at another's expense, but on your own terms." ❑

The Turn of Time

☰

In the village of Mahadevpur, face-to-face meetings between Vasant Bhai and Sharad Bhai have continued for as long as anyone can remember. The reason for these regular encounters is that both men perceive creation and their surroundings–the seasons themselves–in the same way.

As the saying goes, "In plunder, even the spinning wheel makes a profit," and in Mithila, this proverb has circulated since ancient times. The spinning wheel moves in a circle. Whatever one gains or loses through it matters little to Vasant Bhai or Sharad Bhai. What matters to them is this: the segment of time–the year–that has fallen into their share has not truly become their own. And if that is so, what good can it do for the larger community?

One benefits others only when one has first experienced benefit oneself. As it is often said- eat your own bread where you earn it. We all understand that wisdom ripens slowly. If it didn't, then why

would a son presume to command his father?

Both Vasant Bhai and Sharad Bhai have crossed sixty. Yet from childhood, Sharad Bhai has treated Vasant Bhai with a reverence usually reserved for a teacher. Here, being teacher-like does not imply authority, but rather a faithful introduction to life: to time woven closely with lived experience and the cycle of action.

Where such elevated thinking exists, the nature of the relationship between father and son stands clearly visible to all. In any case, it matters little to either Vasant Bhai or Sharad Bhai whether they are able to shape their allotted time according to their will or craft a family pattern in their own image. If this does not happen, how can growth take place at the roots? And then, the bond between teacher and disciple inevitably develops either bitterness or a sweetness that remains forever uncertain.

Sharad Bhai considers Vasant Bhai his teacher because Vasant Bhai offers his season, his phase of time, the breeze of spring itself, as a gift. In contrast, society knows Sharad Bhai's season for its notoriety. Autumn arrives with noise and restlessness, bringing chills and fever, sometimes proving fatal.

In the end, what matters in life is not the distinction between younger and elder, but the capacity to generate a life-giving force, the strength to give, to nurture, and to renew.

Not from today, but from the very moment that

Vasant Bhai and Sharad Bhai became conscious, striving beings, there has existed between them a social bond of such depth that not a single day has passed without the two sitting together and exchanging words about life, face to face. They do this every day, and through this constancy, a relationship has taken shape in which each knows the other's inner taste, both for bitterness and for sweetness.

One truly understands life's bitter and sweet only after tasting both. Only then does life itself, moving between these two poles, sometimes protect us like a bitter medicine and at other times leave a lingering bitterness on the tongue. Sweetness follows the same rhythm and law. Whatever is, is so.

Even so, between the two, between Vasant Bhai and Sharad Bhai, despite a relationship that resembles that of teacher and disciple, or elder and younger brother, there exists no unspoken hesitation about visiting one another without prior notice.

Such thoughts do arise in the mind, of course. Why they arise and how harmony is to be maintained is not the question at present. For now, it is enough to say this: Vasant Bhai feels no constraint about when to go to Sharad Bhai's place, and Sharad Bhai carries not even the faintest doubt about visiting Vasant Bhai without announcing himself first.

The custom of sitting and rising together has

existed in village households since time immemorial. Even the act of sitting together follows the rhythm of the seasons. In the winter months, people gather around the fire to warm themselves, and toward the end of winter, in Phagun, they sit indoors, cracking and eating almonds.

After completing the day's work–after fulfilling whatever effort is needed to keep the day in motion–a thought arose in Vasant Bhai’s mind: perhaps Sharad is held up by something. Why not go and check on him?

Work, after all, is work, something done by the hands and feet. But work, too, has its own knots, the kind that neither hands nor feet alone can loosen. In such cases, only thought and understanding can find a way through. Each person’s thinking shapes the course of their own life. Even creation has its own processes: some driven by movement, others by reflection.

This is the village of Mahadevpur, where even the brotherhood of Sonelal and Achchhelal exists. Between the two brothers, there is no inner warmth or sense of daily companionship. Yet their wives are daughters of two different parents, and so the bond of kinship between the two families remains intact.

Whether at mealtime, during the day or night, the two households often clash in conversation, turning quarrels into habit. After much deliberation, the brothers decided to set up two separate hearths.

In the month of Aghan, a thought came to Sonelal: Achchhelal has more children, so I should add two bundles of paddy from my threshing floor to his. In the same current of thought, Achchhelal, too, felt that his elder brother had always been as hardworking as he was generous in sharing food, and so he added two bundles of paddy from his own threshing floor to his brother’s.

This exchange was not a matter of a single day; it continued throughout the month of Aghan. Each morning, when both counted their bundles of grain, they appeared exactly the same.

Just as Krishna and Dhanshyam share the same dark hue, indistinguishable at a glance, so too did those bundles appear, merging into one another without leaving a trace of difference. Whatever happens, happens. And for Vasant Bhai or Sharad Bhai, it makes little difference. What does not matter to them is turning their personal lives into instruments of social display.

Just as early in the morning Vasant Bhai had set out, arranging the small rituals of his daily life, Sharad Bhai too had done the same and stepped out, guided by a quiet curiosity about Vasant Bhai. On the road the two met, Vasant Bhai and Sharad Bhai, face to face. Each spoke of what lay within his own heart. When thoughts that burn inside the stomach find their way out, it is no wonder that turmoil begins to settle.

Vasant Bhai said- “Sharad, for a long time I have felt the urge to sit and talk, and now you’ve crossed my path.”

Vasant Bhai spoke from the stirrings of his own mind. But within Sharad Bhai as well, his thoughts were already in motion.

Sharad Bhai said- “Brother, there is something stuck in my mind like a thorn. I remember its shadow and its touch, but I have forgotten its root.”

Just as a fishing line, when cast into a pond, sometimes attracts a catch instantly, in the same way, Vasant Bhai had caught his moment.

He said- “If the shadow and the touch are still alive in your mind, then go on, speak of it.”

In a faltering voice, Sharad Bhai replied- “It is an incident from twenty years ago.”

Saying “twenty years,” Sharad Bhai fell silent.

Meanwhile, Vasant Bhai, within himself, began turning the pages of those twenty years–year by year–as one might swirl clarified butter in a glass jar. But turning the pages of years is no child’s play.

Vasant Bhai said- “Sharad, naming a year alone makes it hard to find an incident. Even months are full of events. In a single day, so much can happen.”

Sharad Bhai hesitated to open his mouth, yet Vasant Bhai pressed gently but firmly, until Sharad Bhai finally spoke- “Brother, life is life. Sometimes it laughs, sometimes it weeps. And life itself exists

somewhere in between that laughter and those tears."

Only a bird knows the language of another bird. But here, the matter is not about birds or their speech. What matters here is the bond between Vasant Bhai and Sharad Bhai.

Listening to Sharad Bhai's words, Vasant Bhai's heart wilted, the way a rose wilts the moment it is plucked from its branch. Yet when that same rose draws sap and turns it into nourishment, its colour and form begin to return, just as they were when life still clung to the stem. In this way, Vasant Bhai's withered heart slowly steadied itself. Regaining his composure, he spoke-

"Son, Sharad, if one does not remember one's own life history and leaves it to others, loss is inevitable."

Just as a child begins to murmur and respond on his own even before the lesson is complete, so too did Vasant Bhai's mind begin to speak to itself: this is the same village, the same society, even if for some, numbers have risen or fallen, some have died, and new ones have been born.

Vasant Bhai's thinking was direct and sincere, which is why it struck Sharad Bhai as sound. He said-

"Brother, turn back that account a little more carefully."

The stirrings of the heart rose sharply within

Vasant Bhai. Giving voice to them, he said-

"Sharad, when sons and daughters reach marriageable age, taking their wishes into account is itself a way for parents to set down their burden. Those who fail to do so end up listening to curses spoken through their daughters-in-law."

The road lay quiet between them, but time itself seemed to pause, listening, as the past waited to be unfolded.

In Sharad Bhai's mind, a memory had begun to surface: the moment when he had refused to stand with his own caste, clan, and extended kin in opposition to Vasant Bhai. Even then, Vasant Bhai had stood firm, like Parvatishwar, the son of Punjab, facing Alexander and declaring- "Let fire rain instead of the sun's heat, but Parvatishwar will not step back even a single pace. This land is ours."

With what intent Vasant Bhai had spoken, and with what intent Sharad Bhai had listened, neither truly knew. Not Vasant Bhai, not Sharad Bhai.

After a pause, Sharad Bhai said- "Brother Sahib, turn back a few more pages to the root of that incident."

Just as one feels content upon receiving the fruit of one's own labour, Vasant Bhai replied in a voice of calm assurance- "Son, Sharad, you know this well: from the very beginning, from the very start of my life, I have held this belief in my mind, that when

sons and daughters reach the age of marriage, it is only right to take their wishes into account.”

Carried along by the flow of thought, Sharad Bhai asked-

“Why is it right?”

Vasant Bhai said-

“You understand this too, don’t you, that when my elder daughter, Sudama, was studying at R.K. College, she had already turned twenty-one.”

Sharad Bhai intervened in agreement- “In the village, who didn’t know that?”

Vasant Bhai, a little astonished, replied-

“And did you see anyone in the village stand by us except you? No one did, right?”

Sharad Bhai said-

“Yes, that is true. No one stood with you.”

Vasant Bhai continued-

“What harm did the village society do to me then? But today...?”

As if delivering a judgment already written on his tongue, Sharad Bhai said-

“Do with one hand, receive with the other.”

Vasant Bhai said-

“This is the same village society that boasts of settling disputes of fire and water, that laughs while recounting the tale of Sita’s swayamvar. Yet, when

something actually happens within its own bounds, it turns its face away."

Sharad Bhai responded-

"Yes, it gossips like grain husk in the wind, forever whispering and stirring talk."

Laughing softly, Vasant Bhai said-

"Sharad, if you sit down and add things up, you'll see how many marriages have taken place in this village just like my daughter's. All those people who, that day, had swallowed poison, so to speak, because it was an inter-caste marriage, because the son and daughter chose freely, what did society do to me then? And today, invoking the phrase 'the turn of time,' they straighten their faces and speak with pride."

Sharad Bhai said-

"Basant Bhai, the conversation carried on to the point that we lost all sense of the village and its surroundings. My wife then mentioned that we had run out of tea and sugar, so I needed to go and buy some. I'm heading out now." ❑

Idleness

☰

Makhanpur is a medium-sized village in the central region of Mithilanchal. In this village lives a joint family descended from two brothers, Balgobin and Mangan. Although Makhanpur is considered an old village, and despite its fertile soil and plentiful water, its farming and daily life seem stunted, weighed down by a persistent lethargy. Had the village maintained a written history, its condition might be easier to understand. Instead, it survives on oral tradition, an inherited lore passed from one generation to the next.

Some say that Makhanpur was once surrounded by dense forests and wild animals, and that enormous trees once stood there, intimidating those who wished to settle. Others claim the villagers became so indifferent that they would leave their dhotis to dry under the open sky, a small but telling sign of negligence. After all, every village belongs to its people. Whether one praises or criticizes it, one is ultimately speaking of their own land and their own ancestors.

This is the history as it is told and retold. Yet the reality is visible to all, even if certain truths are suppressed, or neighboring villages, by turning their faces away, have quietly consumed Makhanpur's past. But they know. No village can truthfully claim that idleness or avoidance of labor has never existed within its bounds, or that it doesn't persist even today.

Ruling powers may attempt to rewrite history, but for Makhanpur and for the brotherhood of Balgobin and Mangan, such rewriting holds little meaning. What truly matters is the life lived between the two brothers, and the quiet truths that endure within it.

Everyone knows that this condition did not emerge recently. It has long existed within village society. Just as people of many colors and temperaments have always lived together, so too have individuals of all kinds of behavior, habits, and dispositions existed in villages, and they will continue to do so. But let us set all that aside for now. For the moment, let us speak only of Balgobin and Mangan of Makhanpur.

Makhanpur stands on a stretch of land spared by the rivers Kosi, Kamla, and Bagmati. Even so, some years bring heavy rainfall that leads to severe flooding in the region, and during such years, floodwater does reach Makhanpur. Yet, unlike many other villages, Makhanpur does not suffer

devastation. Its daily bustle continues, and life does not come to a halt. The village is rich in trees, and even when there is occasional loss, the orchards and fruit groves quietly compensate for it.

Time moved forward in Makhanpur. Though it was believed to be a thousand years old, a decisive shift took place in the last nine hundred years. This shift was brought about by the very soil.

In Makhanpur, the underground water table lies just fifteen feet beneath the surface. With such easy access to water, agriculture gained strength and momentum. Being safe from floods, people from neighboring villages began settling there. Gradually, Makhanpur came to be counted among the more prosperous villages in the region. Orchard growth flourished to such an extent that even five years ago, travelers were welcomed to sit beneath the trees and eat mangoes to their heart's content. This was not a village called fertile without reason. People from villages in every direction wished to marry their sons and daughters into Makhanpur.

Over the span of centuries, just as a powerful earthquake can alter the face of a village, a tremor of thought occurred that reshaped Makhanpur's character and way of life.

One significant result of this transformation was the rise of the ghar-jamai custom in Makhanpur. Women arrived from other villages as daughters-in-law, and with them came a dramatic increase in

population. Nearly sixty percent of households in Makhanpur came to include sons-in-law who had settled permanently with their wives' families. The population grew so rapidly that Makhanpur soon stood out as a village of panchayat-level size and importance.

These new arrivals–men who settled as sons-in-law–came from neighboring villages. More than half of them had fallen into koṛhi: not a physical illness, but a deep-rooted habit of idleness. They spent their days absorbed in card games, avoiding labor, and living off the comfort and security that Makhanpur’s prosperity provided.

There may be flaws in their conduct, but they are human beings, after all. Agriculture in the village has flourished to the point of great success, almost as if its growth is touching the sky. Yet within society, the ailment of koṛhi has taken root, partly imported from outside, and partly grown from Makhanpur’s own soil and water.

When a condition grows from the soil and water of a village, it means this: the parents of the household, the in-laws of the sons-in-law, have slowly come to believe that asking a son-in-law to go out and work, or to earn a living, would somehow harm the family's honor and prestige.

There is another side to the story. Some of the men who came and settled in Makhanpur as sons-in-law were already carriers of koṛhi in their own

villages. One might say such things happen everywhere. But consider this: in a village rich with palm and date trees, if the nectar is handed over entirely to outsiders, and all the toddy is sold through non-locals, then what meaning remains in the myth of the gods and demons churning the ocean?

How long can Rahu and Ketu restrain their hunger if they are denied their rightful share?

What exists is simply what it is. The more appetite grows among villagers, the stronger the anchors of village society become. And the firmer those anchors grow, the more space is created for new desires to enter.

Do not confuse Balgobin of Makhanpur with Balgobin, the brother of Manipadma. That Balgobin was so helpless he barely knew whether he was a man or a woman. In contrast, Makhanpur's Balgobin is a man committed to his family life.

There are two brothers in this household: Mangan and Balgobin. Although Balgobin is the elder by birth, his lack of initiative has placed the family under Mangan's supervision. As a result, Balgobin lives under the guardianship of his younger brother and allows him to manage the affairs of the household.

Balgobin never married. There were many reasons why it did not happen. In some cases, it was

a matter of complexion; in others, appearance. Elsewhere, it was a question of caste or lineage. Taken together, this much can be said- for every place where blessings are offered, there are almost as many places where faults are found, perhaps even more.

In the end, one opens the bundle carried on the head only after reaching the in-laws' house, to discover whether what awaits is sweet fritters or a garden. This should not be interpreted otherwise. Just as people eat fritters for seven days, they also eat from the garden. Yet there is another side to this: how many days can one continue eating even the most proper and nourishing food?

The fact that Balgobin did not marry caused not even a trace of bitterness in his heart. The reason for this absence of resentment lies in his simple and balanced nature. Within the family, Balgobin never saw his brother's children as separate from his own.

There are, moreover, two layers to the question of progeny. Even today, many in society believe that human beings are not meant merely for sensual enjoyment. Animals, birds, and insects belong to the realm of indulgence, not humans. Human beings are defined by discipline and conscious practice. They walk the path of purpose, duty, and desire in search of lasting peace; that is, liberation. What we call gati-mukti and what is known as moksha are, in essence, one and the same release.

Balgobin's mind is not bound by the strand of social thinking that insists people like him belong to only one caste. He is well aware that many individuals across castes have remained unmarried yet lived full lives by embracing those around them as family.

At the same time, both within caste society and beyond it, certain customs have taken root: quiet, persistent tendencies that slowly erode the foundation of family life. When marriage alliances are obstructed by calculation or avoided through clever excuses, the very structure of the family begins to weaken.

There are societies in which even a man as twisted as Ashtavakra, bent in all eight limbs, still marries and builds a household. But the deeper question is: how is life to be sustained? For survival, even begging has long existed among us. This does not mean the wealthy are exempt from such dependence. The ethical basis of begging, and its practical meaning, are matters worthy of reflection, though perhaps not at this moment.

Says Kabir, whoever hoards beyond need loses even the chance of release.

Meanwhile, in the village, discussions around the election of the mukhiya are in full swing. Gram Panchayat elections are contested in many ways. On one side are those who present themselves as champions of social reform. On the other, it would

be untrue to say there are none who divide society. Even today, some candidates run their campaigns frugally, while others–the sons of bank managers–lack for nothing.

What more can one say, and how much? A village is a village. Just as Hari is infinite, so too are the stories that circulate in His name.

By chance, early one morning during threshing time, before Mangan arrived in the courtyard with five or six others, he saw Balgobin sitting in the shade outside the landlord's house. At times, Balgobin pressed the toes of his feet with his hands; at other times, he pulled and cracked them with deliberate effort. As Mangan came face to face with him, he muttered under his breath-

"What is there to ask? All his limbs are weighed down with koṛhi."

Balgobin, sitting nearby, heard the words with his own ears. As it was, his foot had been struck by a brick placed to anchor a cattle trough, and the pain had spread through his entire body, leaving him stiff and numb. On top of that, instead of pouring clarified butter over the situation to soothe it, Mangan had smeared it with tar.

In truth, what weighed on Mangan's mind was the desire to present himself as serious and upright in the eyes of the village. Meanwhile, Balgobin pressed the injured spot with his other foot, easing the pain somewhat.

Inner pain is something no one escapes. If it resides in every heart, then Balgobin is no exception. All at once, a thought rose within him: why should the churning of family and society not resemble the churning of the ocean? When there were already five or six influential men present, why should he not share his side of the matter as well?

Balgobin spoke calmly-

“Mangan, you didn’t even ask once about the injury to my foot, and you went straight to calling me koṛhi. Was that just to make sure the villagers heard you?”

What kind of force lay in Balgobin’s words that it made Mangan’s resolve falter? On the other hand, Balgobin’s own life experience was rising from deep within, spilling into his voice, which had now begun to tremble. Hesitating, caught between standing firm and retreating, Mangan replied-

“Right now, good people have gathered in the courtyard. That’s why we must also think about the family’s honour.”

But Mangan’s reasoning had no weight for Balgobin. Just as, deep within the earth at the very root of life, fire, ash, and smoke remain compressed until they burst forth as a volcano, covering entire villages in flame and dust, so too did Balgobin erupt-

“I take care of two cows, carrying out the solhanna in full. Solhanna means everything:

arranging the house and courtyard, building proper shelter for them, feeding and watering them, and guarding them day and night against wild animals. On top of that, I also tend to the fields and farmlands. Yet none of this seems to matter to you. After doing all this, I am still the one being called koṛhi, just so the villagers can hear it. Is this wealth not mine as well?”

Hearing Balgobin’s words, Mangan replied hesitantly-

“Brother, everything belongs to you. After all, the one who works is the rightful owner. I am only the younger brother.”

Had Balgobin’s heart been made of stone, this might have ended differently. But it was not. Even then, his thoughts began to soften. He remembered how, in childhood, he had carried Mangan on his shoulders, taken him to fairs in faraway villages, and shown him the world. How, then, could he see him as distant or separate?

The moment lingered between them, heavy with what had been said and with all that remained unspoken. ❑

Scorn and Ridicule

☰

Early morning. After completing the chores around the courtyard and doorway, Sahna Dadi went to the karjan and saw that a banana bunch, eight or nine hands long, had fallen. Like a skilled craftswoman, she stepped out of the karjan, entered the courtyard, picked up the sickle, and returned to cut the fallen bunch. Once it was cut, her thoughts paused for a moment. She dragged the banana bunch forward, placed it by the roadside, then turned back immediately to examine the condition of the banana plant.

There had been excessive rainfall, and at the same time, water from neighbouring villages had been so tightly blocked that the fields had turned into marshes throughout the monsoon. What should have turned out better than expected had instead become worse than the worst. For an entire month, water had pooled at the roots of the banana plant. Its stem had weakened, and that was why the bunch had fallen.

Bearing this with patience, Sahna Dadi cut the banana plant down at its base and returned with the sickle to the fallen bunch.

Seeing the state of the plant, her heart stirred uneasily. What troubled her was the thought that if the bunch had ripened on the tree, the family could have eaten happily for five days. Almost immediately, her mind shifted. As if settling a village dispute like Kabir himself, Sahna Dadi murmured to herself-

"Go, you did exactly what was in your nature to do. But fate and fortune can still stand in the way."

Her mind accepted it. Lifting the banana bunch in her right hand and holding the sickle in her left, Sahna Dadi moved toward the courtyard. Reaching the yard, she placed the bunch on the veranda and called out to her daughter-in-law-

"Daughter, I've brought vegetables."

'Sahna Dadi' is not the name society gave her at birth. The name her parents gave her was Damayanti. And this is something we see all around us: a man carries his given name from childhood to old age. But the moment a woman steps into her in-laws' house, the name given by her parents is quietly set aside. She becomes bhauji, kaki, chachi, and so on, her own name dissolving into relationships.

Sahna Dadi's son, Gulabchan, works in Calcutta by his own ability, and it is under Sahna Dadi's care that the household is managed. This should not be

misunderstood as a case where an idle man is handed the burden of guardianship just to be fed and clothed.

Her grandson–Gulabchan's son–is named Sumangal. Among five siblings, he is the eldest. Sumangal studies in the ninth class of high school. Thirteen years have passed, and he is stepping into his fourteenth. Fourteen years of exile did not merely sustain Prince Rama; they shaped him into Lord Rama. In the same way, the Pandavas, strengthened by twelve years of exile and one year of living incognito, stood firm with chests bared before the Kauravas.

Innocent Sumangal could hardly know what vegetables and curries are made of. So he sat quietly on the bench at the doorway, reflecting on the routine of his day to come.

Hearing the word vegetables, Sarojni–Sumangal's mother and Gulabchan's wife–stepped out of the house. When she saw the banana bunch on the veranda, she froze in astonishment. She froze because she had never, in her entire life, eaten a curry or vegetable made from unripe bananas. She did not know that it is the tender core of the banana plant that is used to make curry. And this was unripe banana, after all.

Sarojni is, in many ways, a representative figure of village womanhood. To affirm and to deny are two opposing modes of thought and conduct. Sarojni

exclaimed- “What I never saw since my birth, I’m seeing today!”

Like the calm flow of a river in the months of Baisakh and Jeth, Sahna Dadi’s thoughts remained steady. She replied-

“Daughter, you may never have cooked or eaten this; that is different. But to say you never saw it since birth, why speak like that? Your birth, after all, happened some twenty or twenty-five years after mine.”

Adjusting the edge of her sari as she spoke- Sarojni said-

“This banana is nothing but all pith. How can it be peeled? How can the core be taken out and turned into curry?”

Displaying her maturity, Sahna Dadi replied-

“Daughter, this is the same body that must have eaten curry and vegetables made from unripe bananas for fifty days or more. And now you speak as if you’ve never seen such a thing since birth. Why don’t you say instead that a calf born in the month of Saon, when it sees floods in Bhadon, cries out, ‘I never saw such floods since birth’?”

At the mention of the calf, Sarojni could no longer restrain herself. The surroundings, the air, and the social behavior between people had taken such a shape that the differences between elder and younger were pushing both family and society to the

edge of collapse. As a result, ancestral ways of thinking were being trampled.

It is not that everything inherited from the elders was of one single color. There was good in it, and there was bad. What matters is that we judge both good and bad in relation to time.

Hissing like a cobra, Sarojni stepped away from the banana bunch and moved toward the house, saying-

“In life, whatever I never saw, I am now seeing in this courtyard.”

The blow of her daughter-in-law’s words shook Sahna Dadi’s heart. Yet a heart is still a heart. Drawing her own boundaries, Sahna Dadi steadied her thoughts. She felt it was necessary to teach the daughter-in-law something, and also right to give the grandson a sense of direction.

Calling out loudly, she said-

“Son, Sumangal, come here for a moment.”

After thinking about her grandson, Sahna Dadi realized that even if her daughter-in-law belonged to her family, she was, after all, Sumangal’s mother. It would therefore be better to speak in a way that preserved both her own dignity and that of her daughter-in-law. Just as Sarojni had left, hissing like a cobra, it would not be right now to speak with the heavy, hypnotic grip of a python.

In the meantime, Sumangal came up to Sahna

Dadi and asked- "What do you want to say?"

Steadying Sumangal with a calm hand, Sahna Dadi said-

"Son, stay composed. When the same thing is repeated again and again, its weight either increases or diminishes. So let me say it once, and you both–mother and son–listen carefully."

With the intention of either checking the flow of thought or making her own view seem acceptable, Sarojni returned. She came back, but did not speak a word.

Seeing the space now open and understanding her responsibility, Sahna Dadi placed Sumangal in the middle and said- "Son, we planted this banana thinking it was nectar, but in the turning of time, it fell and died. Even so, before throwing it away, we must first look at life and then decide."

Carried along by the current of thought and feeling, Sumangal replied-

"That would be the right thing."

Sumangal's words, however simple, twisted Sarojni's mind like an earthworm writhing beneath a monsoon snake. Enduring the pain of that silent inner turmoil, she remained quiet.

To give firmness to her words, and to speak from her own lived experience, Sahna Dadi continued- "Son, this is the same family where there were months when we did not eat lentils even once.

The kind of banana you see before you now is one whose curry and vegetables we must have cooked and eaten countless times. There’s no keeping track of how often.”

Looking at her son, Sarojni began to forget the losses and displacements of her own life. She said nothing, but with trembling eyes she looked at Sahna Dadi and Sumangal, then lowered her gaze.

Sumangal could not have spoken with understanding, for he had not yet come to fully understand anything.

Sahna Dadi said- “Son Sumangal, even in the same village, people eat and drink according to their means and their strength.”

Sumangal replied- “Yes, people do eat and drink like that.”

To strengthen her point, Sahna Dadi measured her words as one weighs ideas from all sides, placing them on the scales of lived experience. She said-

"Son, just as we make curry and vegetables from unripe bananas and their pith in our family, in Bengal, they prepare dishes using the pith of ripe bananas, which is the very part we tend to discard."

Inside, Sarojni’s mind kept burning. Finding an opening, she said sharply- “Dhaka and Bengal have seen all this already.”

Just as a football kicked into the air is caught by a skilled hand, Sahna Dadi seized Sarojni’s remark

and replied-

"Son, Sumangal, we make curry, vegetables, and chutneys even from jackfruit seeds. But in the western regions, among the Bhojpuri-speaking people, they throw them away."

New thoughts began to rise in Sumangal's mind. Stirring his own thinking, he said-

"Dadi, that's about other regions. But our own area is like this too."

Hearing her grandson's words, Sahna Dadi's thoughts gained momentum. She said-

"Son, our own area is even worse than that. You know the western village of Rampur. On the eastern embankment of Rampur, there are five pirar trees. They grow and flower abundantly. Both their fruit and flowers can be cooked as vegetables. Yet, until recently, the people of that village did not eat pirar at all. Only in the last three years have people learned to eat it. They used to avoid it, saying that a green snake lived in the pirar tree." ❑

We Were Left to Die Unnoticed

☰

Ramlakhan and I were returning from Bijlipur. He was coming back for a personal reason, while I had gone there early in the morning to get my sickle and hoe sharpened. When work is work, it carries its own value.

By the time the sun is fully up, a skilled metalworker has already completed a solid four hours of labor, which includes not just sharpening tools but also swinging a hammer again and again. So if someone is found sleeping at that hour, it is not always without reason. Such sleepers do exist. But they fall into two categories: saints and thieves.

If someone has worked a night shift, it is only natural that he sleeps in the morning. But one who continues to sleep even through the day, without any reason at all, is rightly called a thief. For it is during that sleep that he steals time itself.

In the end, whatever one does, one does for

oneself. There is an old saying in Mithila: one works for one's own sake, not for one's mother or father.

It is true that there are metalworkers in our own village as well, but they have moved beyond sickles and hoes. They have become electricians and computer mechanics. That is why, even for small jobs, one has to go elsewhere.

When I came out of Bijlipur's inner lanes and reached the four-way crossing at Bathnaha, I saw Ramlakhan approaching from the south, riding his bicycle. I stopped there. This pause wasn't because I was hoping to hop onto his bicycle for a ride, but because I remembered that Ramlakhan had left the village just yesterday, and I thought it would be good to ask about the well-being of his family and relatives.

Even today, a certain courtesy still survives in village life. When one sees a fellow villager in another village, one instinctively treats him as one's own, asks about his well-being, and inquires about the reason for his journey. But let that be for now.

As Ramlakhan drew near, he stopped his bicycle beside me. I had already noticed him coming, so from time to time, I had lifted my eyes and glanced southward. Getting off the bicycle, Ramlakhan asked-

"Brother, did your work get done, or are you delayed?"

As he asked- I replied at once, "I know the

metalworker's timings, so I came early. At that time, the craftsman hadn't even begun his work. But coming early had its benefit. We had tea and biscuits as well. The work is done. You're heading back to the village too, aren't you?"

The words slipped out as I spoke- and only afterward did it strike me that I was on foot while Ramlakhan had a bicycle. So how could we truly be companions on the road?

Even after having studied up to high school, Ramlakhan remains sharp-minded. With the curiosity of a learner, he said- "Yes, I'm going back to the village."

These days, habits have formed in such a way that nothing seems to get done without a bicycle. If one thinks back to earlier times–when people simply walked–it becomes clear that the chances of slipping or falling were far fewer.

Be that as it may, the two of us, Ramlakhan and I, continued talking as we went and soon reached the spot near Dharamraj's shrine on the northern side. Just then, we saw Ramphal Kaka approaching from the south, visibly agitated.

Ramphal Kaka, now sixty, has had three wives over the course of his life. After the death of his first wife, he remarried. The first wife bore no children, but the second gave him three. When the children were still young, their mother passed away. After her death, Ramphal Kaka married for the third time, and

his current wife is still alive.

And here a question arises, one that lingers quietly: when one's sons and daughters are still growing up, should one marry again, or not?

By today's thinking, that choice may not seem appropriate. The reasons are clear enough. In earlier times, both family and society were more secure. Many people were seen with one's own eyes who, whether childless or for other reasons, were left alone in old age, yet their families–or kinship-connected households–took on the responsibility of care and carried them through life with dignity.

There was also a living belief then that one's own children were not the only children. The village and society, too, were seen as part of one's family. What existed then, existed. Ramphal Kaka's life belongs to that time.

There were many explanations for the death of Ramphal Kaka's first wife. Even today, some villagers claim that the ghost from her maternal family took her away. Others say, "Ramphal Kaka is no ordinary man; how could his wife have survived living with him?" When one lives in a village, how can people's talk ever be avoided?

After the death of his first wife, Ramphal Kaka married again. During this second marriage, villagers raised many objections and tried all sorts of tricks, but Ramphal Kaka had already tightened his knot. That knot was this: soon after his wife's death, he

had maintained close ties with her in-laws. In other words, a quiet bond had formed with his wife's younger sister. Whatever fate had written, or whatever lay inscribed on his brow, the second marriage took place without much trouble.

In the garden of love, even a human being is shaped anew. Within a year of marriage, Ramphal Kaka had a son. When a son comes into one's hands, hope stirs restlessly in the heart.

Time moved on. By the time the boy reached fourteen or fifteen, two daughters had been born, one before him and one after him, and Ramphal Kaka's second wife had passed away. By then, Ramphal Kaka had entered his late forties. He lived as a widower for two years. During that period, he managed to arrange the marriages of his son and one of his daughters. Even so, the matter of daily cooking and meals had not yet become urgent, because families that have been established for eight or ten years are still capable of managing their own food.

Three years after his marriage, the son left for Calcutta with his wife. The elder daughter also went to her in-laws' home. What remained before Ramphal Kaka was his younger daughter. She cooked the meals, so there was no immediate crisis in the household. And yet, his mind refused to settle.

He could already see what lay ahead: once his younger daughter married, she too would leave for

her husband’s house. Then who would cook? Who would keep the hearth alive? This quiet anxiety slowly took hold of Ramphal Kaka’s mind.

It is true that many great men among us have lived entirely on their own strength, managing everything with their own hands. What was, was. But in today’s world, cooking is no longer a real problem. With machines in hand, kitchen work can be done in ten minutes. Yet such a world had not taken shape then. Seeing his own life growing half-empty and unsteady, Ramphal Kaka chose to marry for the third time.

We were standing at the crossing when Ramphal Kaka came close to us. Seeing his face drained of colour, I asked- “Kaka, why do you look so shaken?”

Ramphal Kaka replied- “Son, don’t ask all this now. My wife has been suffering from an earache. I gave her goat’s milk and poured it into her ear. When that did not help, I also gave her the thick juice of marigold leaves. Still, there was no improvement. That is why I am running to Bijlipur, to the local healer.”

At that moment, Ramlakhan, curious, asked- “Kaka, why don’t you take her to the hospital in Darbhanga?”

Speaking from experience, with the memory of his first wife clearly in his mind, Ramphal Kaka said-

“Son, my first wife–the one I married earlier–

had the same kind of pain in her chest. I hired a vehicle, lifted her up, and set out for Darbhanga. But before I could even reach Manigachhi, she died on the way. Now you tell me, what good did the Darbhanga hospital or the doctor do? Don't stop me now. I'm going. We will talk in the evening."

Ramphal Kaka went off toward the south, and the two of us headed north.

Questions had risen in both my mind and Ramlakhan's. As evening fell, Ramlakhan came and said- "Brother, let's go to Ramphal Kaka's place once."

When we reached Ramphal Kaka's house, I asked- "Kaka, is everything all right now?"

Crushed and broken, Ramphal Kaka replied- "Am I the only ones left to die unnoticed, or are there others too?"

Ramlakhan said- "Kaka, others will speak for themselves. Tell us about yourself."

Ramphal Kaka said nothing. He began to weep uncontrollably. ❑

As the Eyes, So the Wings

☰

After completing his matriculation examination, Jeevanand found himself sitting idly at the darwajja, his mind growing increasingly restless with the urge to learn something new. This need arose from a simple truth: solitude, when prolonged, can make the mind wither. Just as isolation in the world can be a curse, it can also serve as a field for discipline.

That said- the subject here is Jeevanand, a student from a farming family.

In our society, the darwajja may go by a single name, yet it takes on many forms. In a farming household, it becomes festive during rituals, festivals, or when guests arrive. At other times, it slips into a half-dead state. By "half-dead," we refer to those quiet hours of dusk and dawn when people from neighboring homes gather–four or five people from four or five households–sharing memories of today while pondering the thoughts of tomorrow. Once they head off to the fields, embankments, or forests, the darwajja they leave behind lies close to

lifeless.

Even so, differences exist from one household to another. Some families have darwajjas that remain lively day and night. It is also true that in many households, once both earners leave for work outside the village, the darwajja is left deserted, like a cremation ground, for six months at a stretch, and sometimes even for years. After all, this is a village: there are thousands of darwajjas and thousands who pass through them. Villages are villages, and as the name, so the village; each reveals its nature in its own way.

As his restlessness grew, Jeevanand looked toward the village and felt certain that, whatever else might be the case, Dinanath Kaka would be sitting at his darwajja.

Dinanath Kaka is a retired lower primary school teacher. Earlier, when he was still in service, people from the village and the neighboring villages addressed him as Dinanath Babu. Within the village, relationships also existed, but only in a muted form: brother, uncle, elder, grandfather, and the like. Once Dinanath Babu retired and began living in the village full-time, those dormant ties suddenly gathered strength. Now he had become Dinanath Kaka, Baba, Bhaiya, all at once. Jeevanand's mind settled on the thought that it would be good to go to him and learn something from him.

Rising from the darwajja, Jeevanand reached

Dinanath Kaka's place and said-

"Kaka, as I sat at my own darwajja, my mind grew restless, so I came over."

Life before retirement had kept Dinanath Babu bound, tied to the rules of authority and administration. That difference still lingered between the flow of thought then and the flow of thought now. Along with this, his discerning mind had not yet granted him the acceptance that he had crossed sixty years of age. Nor had his thinking hardened to the point that he considered himself completely free of obligation.

Just as Jeevanand spoke- Dinanath Kaka replied-

"Son, however you look at it, you are my nephew, my own kin, part of the extended family as well. If I cannot speak the truth to you, then I would end up keeping the whole world wrapped in falsehood."

Jeevanand could not fully grasp the gravity of Dinanath Kaka's words. Still, a quiet curiosity stirred in his mind. He was young, after all, and Dinanath Kaka had already crossed sixty, an age rightly associated with the experience of a full life. It occurred to Jeevanand that if he were to speak openly and say, "Kaka, I couldn't quite understand what you meant. Please say it again," then what purpose would his ears serve if not to listen?

Besides, Dinanath Kaka now stood as a senior

figure in the family. It would be better, Jeevanand thought, to speak with care. Just as a grammarian sheds grammatical rigidity when the moment demands it, perhaps it would be right to ask gently, "Kaka, please explain it a little more closely."

So Jeevanand asked-

"Kaka, do you look at the world's families through your own family, or do you look at your family through the lens of the world's families?"

Hearing this, Dinanath Kaka suddenly grew serious. The reason was simple: one's own family may appear uniform, but the families of the world are not. They are varied and many-coloured. How, then, could one view one's own family through the world's lens?

For a moment, Dinanath Kaka's mind wavered along this line of thought, but it quickly steadied. What grounded him was the rise of another idea: families do not function in isolation from social customs and codes. Whether it is a festival or farming work, such practices follow what society at large observes. If one were to stop following them, society itself would turn its face away.

Dinanath Kaka's mind became entangled in the relationship between family and society. As that entanglement deepened, a third thought arose: when people in society follow certain customs–festivals, farming routines, seasonal practices–how

much of it is truly good and useful, and how much is harmful or unnecessary?

Almost immediately, his thoughts turned back again. He realised that not all families in society are of the same kind or standing, nor are the fields, farms, and agricultural practices uniform. If that is the case, how can everything be of one standard, one measure?

As Dinanath Kaka lifted his gaze in the midst of these thoughts, wherever he looked, it felt as though he were standing amid embankments and forests, surrounded on all sides by trees and hills. One may understand it this way: we live on the plains shaped by rivers like the Ganga and the Brahmaputra, while Kathmandu in Nepal lies on a plateau. Yet even there, when one stands and looks around, tall mountains seem to encircle it from every direction.

Inwardly, Dinanath Kaka's thoughts were churning into a thick knot. But when he turned his gaze inward, he understood something vital: that failing to find a final answer to every question is also natural.

Suddenly, an old thought surfaced in his mind. Humans are not God, but they are part of the divine. Then why grind one's thoughts into exhaustion? God may manifest as Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahadev, but a human being can breathe in many ways and hold many perspectives at once.

As these reflections settled, Dinanath Kaka's

mind cleared. Just as people rise from their beds when the weather turns pleasant, he too rose, thinking it would be better to ask Jeevanand a question and seek an answer. In that answer lay either the right direction or a turn toward the wrong path, and recognising the difference mattered.

Dinanath Kaka said to Jeevanand-

“Son, just as we stand upon you now, so too do we place our hopes in you.”

Just as Dinanath Kaka gave Jeevanand the space to speak first, Jeevanand stood firmly on his own path and asked-

“Kaka, what is complete freedom?”

Hearing the question, Dinanath Kaka did not fall silent, but he paused to weigh its seriousness. Just as great treatises or books and thick volumes, despite their bulk, ultimately distill into a single word–a title–so Dinanath Kaka replied-

“Son Jeevanand, as the eyes are, so will the wings be.”

Hearing this, Jeevanand felt as though he had entered a forest where paths branched out in every direction, leaving him bewildered. When every way appears to be a way, which one is truly one's own? As Prasadji–Jaishankar Prasad–has said- life’s aim is not to remain settled in a house of peace, but to reach those roads beyond which there is no further road.

Jeevanand said- “Kaka, just as my mind felt

empty and restless before, after hearing all this, it feels even more hollow."

Laughing gently, Dinanath Kaka replied-

"Son, this is the very direction of practice. When the mind is empty before speaking, and becomes empty again after expressing thought, that itself is the state of calm, and state of peace."

As he spoke- Dinanath Kaka became emotionally absorbed, suddenly recalling the sensation of freedom itself. In between, he added,

"Son Jeev, right now the mind has drifted into the ocean's waves, so I won't say much more."

Feeling the warmth of his own voice and carried by the flow of thought, Jeevanand said-

"Kaka, if you won't say much, then don't. But surely, saying just one thing causes no harm."

Just as sweetness upon sweetness, or salt upon salt, delights the tongue, Dinanath Kaka replied with a smile,

"Son, what a free life truly is, we will talk about that another day." ❑

Bananas for Chaurachan

☰

Shripur and Saurabhpur are two neighbouring villages. And because they are villages, people of many castes live there. Some castes are shared between both places, while others are distinct, having origins elsewhere. Yet the two villages share a particular trait. Just as they are home to dozens of castes, each caste has its own devghar, its own sacred space. These are public places, but public in a caste-specific sense, not in the broader social sense. In this way, each deity has its own recognised ground.

Both villages are also fortunate. They lie at a safe distance from the Kosi and are equally far from the Kamla. Because of this, they have been spared the ravages of floods. That very distance has become their good fortune.

There is a friendship between Makshudan of Shripur and Jibachh of Saurabhpur. Of course, there are hundreds of friendships between the two villages: across castes, within castes, and beyond

caste lines altogether. Since the villages lie side by side, ties of kinship and shared customs continue to flow naturally between them.

Four days before the Chaurachan festival, Makshudan of Shripur arrived at the house of Jibachh in Saurabhpur to collect bananas. Makshudan and Jibachh had studied together in the same school up to matriculation. Back then, around fifty or sixty years ago, being in the same class had turned them into friends. After passing matriculation, Makshudan joined the Railway Police, while Jibachh stayed back in the village and took up farming.

There were clear reasons behind Jibachh's choice to pursue agriculture. First, he was alone within the brotherhood of his family. Second, the web of familial responsibility had already spread wide around him. In other words, Jibachh's household reflected the structure of a typical middle-level farming family. With five bighas of irrigated land, he cultivated all kinds of grains. In addition, he had ten kathas of orchards, a pond of fifteen kathas where fish and foxnuts were raised, and two buffaloes tied in the cattle shed. With so much already in hand, why would one seek a job elsewhere?

Besides, village life carries its own kind of oral learning–an unwritten wisdom–which teaches that a person's life becomes truly graceful only when one

keeps a distance from excessive attachment and craving. Whatever the case may be, Jibachh remained unconcerned by such talk. What mattered to him was simple: just as Raghuvir, his father, had lived his manly, self-reliant life within society, so too would he live his own.

In the family, there were also two buffaloes, whose care Jibachh had taken up when he was barely fifteen or sixteen years old. He continued this responsibility for as long as his father lived. After all, it was a family, and within every family there is a shared belief that one should run the household through one's own labour. There is no flaw in this intention; in fact, it is through such effort that one recognises his own strength. The only shortcoming arises when all responsibility remains collective and undefined.

That shortcoming disappears when work is assigned individually, when new tasks, or old tasks in renewed form, are entrusted person by person. But whatever was done or not done made little difference to Makshudan and Jibachh. What truly did not matter to them was this: despite belonging to two villages and two castes, the friendship born in high school had continued across an entire lifetime.

Because he was in the Railway Police, Makshudan used to return to the village once a month, sometimes even twice. For someone who has to worry about fares and expenses, the entire month

can slip away in calculation and adjustment. For someone without that burden, what obstacle is there to coming home?

Even while living away, Makshudan continued to meet Jibachh from time to time. Because of this, the flow of life between them never lost its rhythm or fell into dull sameness.

Fifteen years after his retirement, Makshudan came again to Jibachh's place. The weather was blazing. In the month of Bhado, the sun and heat grow sharper than at other times, like green chillies that sting more than usual. Here, a word is worth noting: tīkh. In Bhojpuri, tīkh is understood to mean bitter, and the taste of chilli is described as tīkh. Among us Maithil brothers, however, tīkh means kadru, that is, sharp or pungent, and so we describe the taste of chilli as kadru. Let people shape words as they please. What matters is that the one for whom the word is shaped understands it.

In the early morning heat, Makshudan reached Jibachh's place in search of bananas. It was close to ten o'clock. Jibachh was in the orchard, working among the banana plants, in what was, by the measure of time, the final stretch of the day's labour. He was about to stop work on time, because work itself is no less deceptive than a trickster. If work clings too tightly with its own attraction, it makes one forget time and strips it of order. Once order is lost, the rhythm of life is disturbed. And when

rhythm is disturbed, routine breaks down. When routine breaks down, life itself begins to falter.

Getting down from the tempo onto the road, Makshudan reached the familiar doorway and called out in a voice of recognition- “Is anyone home?”

In their long-standing relationship, Makshudan addresses Jibachh with Hau, and Jibachh replies with the same easy familiarity. Hearing the call at the doorway, Jibachh’s grandson–Swarooplal–came out into the courtyard. As soon as he saw Makshudan, he said- “Baba, I bow to you. Why did you step out of the house at such a time?”

An lazy man looks for rest, but a working man looks for work. Fearless Makshudan, who had spent his life among railway passengers, replied-

“Son, first call your grandfather. I’ll lend a hand with the work and we’ll talk too.”

As Makshudan spoke- Swarooplal went to call Jibachh. Just a katha away from the doorway lay the banana grove where Jibachh was working. Standing at the edge, Swarooplal called out- “Makshudan Baba has come.”

At the sound of Makshudan’s name, Jibachh stopped his work at once and set off. When he reached the doorway and saw the young lad standing before him, Swarooplal, now seventeen and a makshuda, Jibachh gathered his thoughts and said, “Brother, would you like to drink water first, or tea?”

Expressing the ease of a settled life, Makshudan replied- “You and I are not strangers. Why should I feel awkward about drinking or not drinking? And why should you feel awkward about sending a visitor away thirsty from your doorway?”

Carried by the flow of thought and behaviour, Jibachh said- “Why would there be any awkwardness? Our forefathers have said it well: work together, and there is no shame in winning or losing. And when both of us behave as expected, what concern is it of anyone else?”

Makshudan said- “Jibachh, you sit too. And you as well, son Swaroop. I won’t drink water, because the doctor has forbidden it. He said I should drink only my own water, that is, purified water. That’s why you see a bottle of water in my pocket. As for tea, I drink it regularly now: one cup in the morning and one in the evening. So I won’t have tea either.”

Jibachh already knew this, yet when a man hears another explain his way of life in his own words, the seeds of trust fall more firmly. Fixing his gaze there, Jibachh said- “Brother, should we tell the next generation how old we have become?”

Jibachh and his family drew Makshudan so deeply into memory that his words momentarily stumbled. Yet he still said-

“Son Swaroop, you belong to the third generation. Just as you are here, I also have a

grandson. I retired from the Railway Police fifteen years ago. I am two years short of eighty. That is my age now."

Hearing Makshudan's words, Swarooplal listened through his own lens of understanding, comparing the two men silently. From the standpoint of a BA student, he looked at practical life and reflective life along a single line. Meanwhile, Jibachh nudged the conversation back toward work and said-

"Let us talk about the work first."

Makshudan said- "Today is Kushi Amavasya. Tomorrow is the day, and for the past fifteen years, every year on this occasion, I have been taking bananas."

Jibachh already knew this well; the memory surfaced at once. He said-

"Come, let's walk around the banana grove and look. You can take whichever bunch you like."

The three of them–Makshudan, Jibachh, and Swarooplal–walked through the grove, their eyes moving carefully over the banana plants. Spotting a bunch ready to be cut, Makshudan said-

"This bunch is ready. But who will eat such a big one? For the past three years, I've been looking for smaller bunches, just enough to fulfil the vow my daughter-in-law keeps."

Just as one knows at a glance that a place feels right to live in, Jibachh replied- "The daali for

Chaurachan is traditionally decorated using whole bunches of bananas. For Chhath, the entire bunch is offered as well. Given this, why have you started trimming things down in between like this?”

Laughing, Makshudan said-

“I’ll manage it by taking a tempo.”

Jibachh asked- “How did this vow come into the middle of a festival?”

Catching Jibachh’s hint, Makshudan replied-

“Just say it yourself. When we are in the middle of settling the full account, why did you suddenly leave after agreeing to the banana grove deal? The sun is getting harsh, and tomorrow we’ll have to come back to the village and look into two or three more debts.”

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Notes